

Rosengård – A Space of Swedish Alterity in Times of Austerity

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Abstract

The housing area Rosengård was part of the modernist building process called the “Million Programme” in Sweden. It was built in the city of Malmö between 1967 and 1972 for approx. 20 000 inhabitants. As I have shown in an earlier study, Rosengård became emblematic in a fierce debate around the failures of modern society during and shortly after its completion (Ristilammi 1994, 1998). The area soon became stigmatized as a place containing and creating social problems. During the 50 years since Rosengård was built, despite numerous attempts at urban transformation, this stigma has prevailed. Through time the character of the stigmatic alterity has changed from the fear of the poor under-classes to a fear of the ethnic Other. International right wing news media has used Rosengård as a symbol for European naivety regarding the effects of migration, labeling Rosengård as a no-go area for Swedes. In this presentation I will argue that the stigmatization processes around areas like Rosengård evoke structures of feelings that are not only connected to the areas themselves, but also function as a container for overarching societal fears around the security of the middle classes in times of economical austerity measures around Europe

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In this presentation I will argue that the stigmatization processes around areas like Rosengård evoke structures of feelings that are not only connected to the areas themselves, but also function as a container for overarching societal fears around the security of the middle classes in times of economical austerity measures around Europe (cf Swyngedouw 2014). In this process so called no-go areas turn to *zones of the abject* (Foster 2015).

Within this context I view fear as a discursively mediated component within the “narrative blocs” that use specific spaces as constituents of social narratives of national identity thus producing specific historically situated “topophobias”. Within these areas violence becomes a language of fear (cf Feldman 1993). In my earlier work I identified three different historically situated forms of alterity which affected the notions of Rosengård and similar areas (Ristilammi 1994,1998). I used the notion of modernity in order to understand the shifts in discourse concerning impoverished housing areas in Sweden.

The Modern Alterity

The Swedish writer Max Lundgren describes when his family moved to a modern apartment in the late 40's:

I had been to Malmö before, yet I was struck dumb when I stood at the vanload of furniture looking up at our house. The apartment was on the fourth floor. The elevator buzzed and I was standing there breathless: with elevators being stuck. I was holding a terrified woman by the hand; my mother was in cold sweat. /.../ The apartment had three rooms and a lounge. The living-room had parquet-flooring. Before this my mother had only read about parquet-floors. It was considered as a luxury of almost sinful proportions. Even with our shoes off, me and my sister were forbidden to tread the floor. Not until long afterwards have I understood what happened to my mother that October day when we moved to Malmö. She took the step from one age of time to another; precisely in the same way as thousands of other women at the same time. (Lundgren in Carlström 1985:10f, translation by author)

A unique feature of Swedish modernist architecture was the association with a social democratic political project. Housing embodied an ideological message of democratic rights and economic equality. However, it was not until after WWII that the modernizing program which had been formulated in the 1930s, was realised. In Sweden, the government tightened control over construction through new loan regulations which assured certain minimum norms concerning the size and equipping of apartments.

The rational planning in Sweden became a model for all of Europe as it rebuilt its cities after WWII. The fifties were a time of consolidation of the Swedish modernity-project. Now the planning started for the last step in the project. The Swedish parliament made the decision to produce one million new apartments over a ten year period; it was called the million program.

Rosengård, one of the million program's housing projects, was planned for 20,000 people who were to live in apartments produced by three different construction companies. Great effort was made in order to separate automobile and pedestrian traffic and to create, , large green spaces including playgrounds for children. Construction went rapidly and people started settling into the area before everything was completed which created a settler's atmosphere. For many, the move also implied a journey through time and up through the social hierarchy. Moving was an opportunity to become modern and to become a leading force in the project of Swedish modernity.

I would like to call this stage a *modern alterity*. You differed from the rest of society by being ahead of it. You could travel through time-space and social space at the same time. In this stage there was no time looking back. It was a youthful stage, full of hope for the future. The waves of moving in the city, from unmodern to modern areas, can be described as compressions of history in which the geographical movements symbolized leaps along a perceived axis of time. History was in this story something that should be left behind, or leaped over. The present was a starting-point for the future. However, the area's back sides became apparent rather quickly. In the front-lines of modernity, it was possible to rely on the strategy which had been drawn up in Sweden in the previous decades. However, by the beginning of the 1970s more and more people in society began to view Swedish modernity as a cracked entity.

The Social Alterity

I would like to cite a piece from a newspaper article from 1972 in one of Swedens largest newspapers with national coverage:

Mama....maaa....maaa....maaa....A child calls with weak voice. The echo catches the call and hurls it at the high bodies of the buildings. It rebounds at the concrete floor, resounds along the walls, past hundreds of identical balconies. It is told about Rosengård in Malmö that a little child was calling from the courtyard up towards the windows and balconies: Mama, I am hungry...A minute later fifteen plastic bags hurled through the air, each containing a sandwich. (Dagens Nyheter 31st of May 1972, authors translation)

It is an almost poetic tone in this description. It is certainly an urban legend which was widespread during this time the beginning of the 70's. *It is told*, it says in the article.

In these negative descriptions modern legends are mixed with impressionistic descriptions of life in the area and statements from dissatisfied inhabitants of Rosengård. A fundamental powerlessness is illustrated here; however, the lack of power is not described in analytical terms but through poetics. Symbols are allowed to speak and appeal to the emotions in people, and through this, reality is divided into black and white. The press makes use of distinct symbols in its attempt to appeal to a mass public. It draws ammunition from the political power struggles which take place in public, and in Rosengård's case, the debate is most feverish after the publication of each research report.

Malmö's social problems did not disappear despite the fact that the older socially burdened inner city environments had been cleared. Rosengård and the other areas of the million program began to be criticized by people who did not have faith in the society which had developed in Sweden in the period after WWII. Rosengård began to be converted into an arena of political struggle, a struggle which would have both positive and negative effects.

Those people who had planned, made decisions about, and financed Rosengård and other similar areas had a difficult time understanding the fierce reaction. In their eyes, Rosengård was the terminus of a long struggle against those environments which for them symbolized poverty and degradation. In their world of experience, it was the struggle against the previous impoverished society which was most important, and this struggle had been conducted with modernity as a weapon. They could not imagine that these new modern residential areas could bear disadvantages with them.

What the architects, planners, politicians, and residents did not understand, was that behind the materiality of Rosengård lay a power struggle whose primary characteristic was that its weapons were variable. The buildings were not merely neutral dwelling machines, but also symbols and as symbols they risked being exposed to rapid conversion.

This borderland was a way of driving forth the project which had started in the 1930s. That which both the radicals and the local politicians perceived as a total disjuncture was actually the creation of a discursive field with a physical grounding in which the modern project could go on

and be renewed (and destroyed), and in which one could exchange opinions in words and actions about the design of the modern welfare state. Thus, the conflict addressed two sides of the same thing; the value of a strong society - of the social state - and the idea of the solidary society. At the same time, the struggle was also a symptom of the economic crisis which contained the seeds of a *crisis of representation*.

Areas like R. were considered to be symbolizations of the oppressive nature of capitalist society. The voyage into the future that R. had symbolized in its modern phase, had come to a halt. The progress into the future had stopped short of the fields beyond these areas. In the social alterity that R. now had transformed into, time stood still and this was a reflection of the fact that the momentum in the Swedish modernity-project had stopped. While the motor was still running, it was now out of gear.

The Ethnic Alterity

We are going to take over Malmö, followed by: Respect! We will take over the respect! We will make sure that Rosegardens reputation as the worst place in town lives on. When these guys realize that I am a journalist and want to ask some questions, they are drawn to me like flies to a cube of sugar.

This meeting echoes other encounters of a colonial nature. I was talking about youthfulness in my account of the modern alterity and you can connect this to a relativization of time where different people become connected to different places on a time-scale. Rosegarden, and other Swedish concrete suburbs have been transformed from being in the front of a time-scale to being laggards-behind again. The suburbs are treated as a threat with risk of contamination of the surrounding societies. These structures of feeling are old. They derive from a time when techniques of dealing with indigenous populations in the era of high colonialism were being brought back to western cities and were projected to the "big-city-jungles" here at home (cf Ristilammi 1998). Those kids who met the reporter talked about respect. The only way they can get respect is by echoing, in a mimetic way, the fears that the surrounding society project onto them. There is a fetishistic bind between the reporter and the kids. Thus, Rosengård has become a free floating sign which not only signifies Rosengård, but also other similar areas. It is the gap between the sign and the signification which creates disease and frustration.

The possibilities for individuals to "freefloat" in this society are very unevenly distributed. The kids who meet the journalist in Rosegarden are forced in to very specific forms of cultural expressions if they want to assert some form of dignity towards the outer-world. In this arena which Rosengård constitutes, border lines are maintained which recreate and newly-create modernity to the extent that it must relate to the problems of Rosengård. Post-industrial society is not articulated through a political center, but in its periphery. Rosengård is one of these peripheral borderlands.

Present alterity?

So could there be a fourth story involving Rosengård with a similar connection to national identifications and modernity? It has been 20 years since I formulated the three previous stories. Since the economic rent crisis in the beginning of the 90's in Sweden a concentration of wealth has occurred within the economy. Neoliberal economic policies has meant that social services has been withdrawn from areas like Rosengård. Within a Swedish context Rosengård

has continued to be a focal point for societal fear. What should be said is that every different iteration of alterity contains layerings of the previous one. The spectre of unfulfilled modernity still haunts the area paired with the notion that Rosengård is inhabited by still not modern people. In later time this notion has transformed from a general ethnic alterity to a decidedly muslim alterity which means that the notion of majority identity contains a strong anti-muslim sentiment. This is a development that is strong throughout Europe with different expressions of fear dependent on the different formulations of national modernity.

I view these stigmatizing processes as societal forces that feed into the negative dynamics that perpetuates the use of violence as language among groups that have grown up in these areas.

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