Introduction

Stockholm Is Destroyed
The Battle over Göteborg
Stop Gentrification in Möllevången (Malmö)

These are the messages that I encountered on leaflets, posters, and banners as I traveled through the cafés, bookstores, social centers, and squats created by autonomous left-wing movements in Sweden’s major cities. Cities were formidable battlefields for the competing forces of capitalism, government regulation, and activism. Gentrification was the enemy, turning activists into amateur urban planners, architects, builders, and neighborhood association leaders to create more participatory, democratic neighborhoods. Yet I did not visibly encounter activism in either Stockholm or Göteborg with any regularity. In contrast, Malmö activists had visibly marked “their” territory with spray paint, stickers, and graffiti. These visual markings on the streets, sidewalks, and walls indicated a social movement presence and served as a set of territorial boundaries.

drawn by activists to denote that the battle for the neighborhood was under way.

On a summer day in June, I ventured out for a walk through Möllevången, a neighborhood in central Malmö, Sweden. The neighborhood is anchored by Folkets Park (the People’s Park) on its northeastern edge, so I took a bus to the park entrance to begin my stroll. A placard at the entrance explains that the park was purchased by the Social Democratic Party in 1891 as a place for political speeches, recreation, and demonstration. This park was also intended to provide nineteenth-century laborers a retreat from polluted factories and cramped housing. The Social Democratic history of the park was evident as I passed through the gates. I was immediately drawn to a large fountain in the shape of a pink rose (the rose is a symbol of Social Democracy), where children splashed as their parents chatted among one another. A series of concrete busts dot the landscape: Per Albin Hansson, a prominent architect of the Social Democratic Party during the 1920s and ’30s stands proudly next to people lounging on picnic blankets. Olof Palme, leader of the Social Democratic Party from 1969 until his assassination in 1986, stands silently among the trees.

I exited the park and walked on the streets of Möllevången with no real destination in mind. Planned as a residential neighborhood for industrial workers in the early twentieth century, Möllan, as locals call it, is characterized by the kind of solid, blocky buildings that one commonly sees in former working-class districts in Sweden—concrete, heavy, and drably colored in shades of goldenrod, olive green, and brown brick. A wall along the park’s edge was plastered with posters for events and concerts, but I was most intrigued by one that read, “Stop the Gentrification of Möllevången.” As I walked farther along the street, I came across a spray-painted message on the sidewalk: “Isolate Israel.now” (Isolera Israel.nu) and made a note to look it up when I got home (it turned out to be a network aimed at leading boycotts and sanctions against Israel in favor of a free Palestine; see BDS Sweden 2014). A drainpipe bore an Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) sticker. Another poster announced the upcoming Möllevångsfestivalen, a street festival celebrating socialism and environmentalism with “red” and “green” coded streets, respectively.

I stopped for coffee at Glassfabriken, a café housed in a former ice cream factory. The political character of the café was evident
everywhere. More of the large, colorful flyers inside the front door called on visitors to “Stop the Gentrification of Möllevången.” Racks of magazines with titles such as Direkt Aktion (Direct Action) lined the walls. The cash register was covered with stickers that read “Love Animals, Don’t Eat Them” and “These faggots bash back,” mixing the messages of animal rights and queer activism. A library along the back wall contained anti-capitalist manifestos: No Logo and The Shock Doctrine by Naomi Klein.

As I sipped my coffee, I reflected on how social movements were inscribed on the landscape of Möllevången. Taken alone, this experience might not have been particularly surprising. However, I had spent months in Stockholm and Göteborg, Sweden’s two largest cities, trying to learn about urban social movements. Based on what I had read online, both cities seemed to have vibrant, active urban movements. While I observed consistent squatting actions, demonstrations, and conversations around urban space, they were scattered, temporary, and difficult to find.

In Möllevången, urban space was visibly marked with the signs and symbols of social movements, both past and present. A network of urban activists was connected through a network of physical spaces: Glassfabriken, the social centers Utkanten and Kontrapunkt, a radical feminist bookshop called Amalthea, the local neighborhood association, and more—all within walking distance of one another. The more I frequented these places, the more I saw the same people repeatedly, even bumping into them on the streets. These networks were also centrally located, meaning they were not difficult to find or access, so many different people encountered social movements in the same way that I had.

My walk through the streets of Möllevången made me question how urban movements are spatially constructed in their local environments. The visible, concentrated activism of Möllevången in central Malmö was a stark contrast to the scattered and temporary actions I had observed in the Göteborg and Stockholm suburbs. How do different urban settings affect the spatial dimensions of social movements? Why are some movements embedded in the urban landscape while others struggle to leave a mark?

This book charts the spatial dimensions of social movements and the urban conditions under which they thrive or fade. My research
Chapter 1 revealed that gentrification was key to understanding the spatial strategies of urban movements. On one hand, gentrification sharpened social movement grievances and led many activists to becoming expert planners, builders, and neighborhood association leaders. On the other, rising rents, changes in local amenities, and battles with authorities eventually destroyed the conditions under which these movements thrived.

This book centers social movement scenes as structures of resistance. For social movements that promote a subcultural or countercultural way of life, social movement scenes are crucial for understanding social movement momentum and vitality. A social movement scene is “a network of people who share a set of subcultural or countercultural beliefs, values, norms, and convictions as well as a network of physical spaces where members of that group are known to congregate” (Leach and Haunss 2009, 260, emphasis in the original). In this book, the network of people consists of loosely organized and ideologically varied networks called autonomous social movements. The ideological variety is evident in symbols dotting the streets of Malmö: anti-capitalist, anti-fascist, anti-gentrification, queer, and animal rights activists are all part of the scene. The autonomous movements in this book are urban movements, not only because they operate in urban areas but because their efforts focus on how city space is used and by whom.

Centering scenes in my analysis differs from sociological social movement scholarship, in which scenes are cast as pools of mobilization for “real” activism and auxiliary to social movements. I argue that the production of scenes is activism for urban movements, not a precursor to it. Scenes are where many urban movements experiment with creating participatory, democratic cities. Through the production of social movement scenes, urban movements seek to change the built environment, social fabric of neighborhoods, and local political processes. For example, during Möllevångsfestivalen, an annual street festival in Möllevången that people considered part of the scene, activists installed living room furniture on the streets and sidewalks. Residents moved their own sofas, chairs, coffee tables, and rugs into the streets—some even included water bowls for pets. This changed the built environment, transforming the streets and sidewalks from pathways for pedestrians and cars into places you wanted...
to sit down and enjoy with friends. It also brought the social fabric of the neighborhood into full view. Möllevången was the kind of neighborhood where people stopped and chatted through open windows or while passing each other on the street. When the streets became a giant living room, we all got to feel that same social connectedness that residents felt in their everyday lives. Prompted by activists, this action spread through the neighborhood, giving their neighbors an opportunity to “reclaim their streets” and create participatory spaces for imagining the future of the neighborhood.

Interviews with thirty-eight autonomous activists and fourteen months of ethnographic observations capture the social dynamics of scenes, while comparative case analysis reveals some of the driving factors for why scenes thrive or fizzle in different urban environments. Differing configurations of social movement scenes are partially shaped by the structural conditions of the cities in which they form. Malmö activists felt emotionally connected to a particular neighborhood because of its labor movement history, carefree character, rich cultural life, and sociocultural heterogeneity. The threats posed by gentrification of the area energized autonomous movements. Their efforts were aimed at solidifying their place (as residents and as activists) in a unique neighborhood that they loved. In Stockholm and Göteborg, analogous neighborhoods gentrified decades ago. Social movements no longer had a place in the physical and social landscape of central Stockholm and were fleeting in Göteborg.

Gentrification and the Swedish Welfare State

Sweden is a strategic place for studying urban movement scenes for two reasons. First, advanced welfare states are more conducive to the development of social movement scenes (Leach and Haunss 2009). In societies where unemployment insurance and healthcare are not dependent on employment status and the cost of education does not create a lifetime of debt, full-time engagement in radical politics is more possible. Second, Swedish housing policy presents a unique hybrid of strong government regulation and free market competition. This constrains urban movements in terms of “do-it-yourself” styles of building but also forces them to be tactically innovative. Additionally, unlike some European countries that recognized squatters’
rights in response to housing shortages after World War II, Sweden was neutral during the war, so squatting and claiming space without permission has never been legal. As more countries evict social movements from their spaces and places, perhaps the Swedish cases can provide some tactical inspiration.

Though the image of Sweden as a social democratic paradise persists in the minds of many scholars, this is a stereotype based on outdated notions of the Swedish welfare state. To outside observers, it might seem that a strong welfare state like Sweden would slow the process of gentrification. The modern Swedish housing system was established by a “strong welfare state with cheap high-quality housing through subsidized construction, strong tenant protections, high formal demands on quality standards, and collectively negotiated rent levels” (Baeten et al. 2017, 636). Affordable “housing for all” was a pillar of Swedish social democracy when the government began “The Million Program” (Miljonprogrammet), an ambitious plan to address housing shortages by constructing one million new dwellings over a ten-year period (1965–1974). The program exceeded its goal, leading many scholars to characterize the housing system as yet another “success” of Swedish social democracy (Baeten et al. 2017; Christophers 2013; Hedin et al. 2012).

Constructing new housing stock meant demolishing thousands of inner-city homes to make room for new ones. In the late 1960s, grassroots urban movements (byalagsrörelsen) began to protest demolitions and the wave of housing displacement they created (Franzén 2005; Stahre 1999). The political economy of housing—and Swedish cities more generally—shifted in the early 1970s. Rent regulations were lifted, making urban housing markets competitive (Franzén 2005), and a national economic crisis began the process of welfare retrenchment (Thörn and Thörn 2017). In the absence of state funding, cities used entrepreneurial strategies to find new funding sources and turned to market-based solutions. These shifts created a “monstrous hybrid” of government regulations and neoliberal policy, deepening socioeconomic segregation (Christophers 2013) and fomenting resistance from urban movements.

1. For a discussion on the transformations of everyday life in the Million Program areas, see Kärrholm and Wirdelöv 2019.
Gentrification began in Stockholm’s city center in the early 1970s (Franzén 2005), Göteborg in the 1980s (H. Thörn 2012), and Malmö in the early 2000s (see Chapter 4). Comparing scenes in these three cities allows us to see how, on one hand, gentrification creates opportunities for urban social movements to claim territory and experiment with “spatial justice.” On the other hand, gentrification disrupts and eventually destroys the urban environments these movements need to thrive. The Malmö case was paradigmatic of a scene that thrived for years in a gentrifying neighborhood. Activists predicted (correctly) that the scene would eventually fizzle, but they used the scene to appropriate space and create opportunities for residents to participate in shaping the future of their neighborhood. In this way, social movement scenes are promising structures for challenging neoliberal urbanism, characterized by large-scale urban development, entrepreneurial governance, privatization of infrastructures and services, and social inequalities (Harvey 2012; Mayer 2016).

Social Movement Scenes: A Conceptual Framework

There has been little “cross-fertilization” between geographical and sociological analyses of social movements; what does exist is mainly the work of geographers studying collective action rather than sociological analyses of spatiality (Martin 2015, 153). Even within sociology, urban movement research remains rather separate from “mainstream” social movement studies. Just as a social movement scene is a constellation of places that form a coherent whole, my conceptualization of a social movement scene is an interdisciplinary collage of scholarship in cultural studies, sociology, geography, and urban studies. I begin laying out a conceptual framework for social movement scenes with a discussion of how this concept contributes to scholarship on social movement cultures. Then, I turn my attention to a discussion of how the concept contributes to sociospatial perspectives in geographical and urban studies scholarship.

My theoretical contributions to understanding social movement scenes are twofold: first, I argue that scholars should analyze the production of social movement scenes in order to better understand how urban social movements shape and are shaped by their local environments. This contrasts with the work of scholars who have examined
the auxiliary role that scenes play as easy access points for movements (Leach and Haunss 2009) or as pools of mobilization (Allen and Miles 2020). Second, I add conceptual specificity to the concept of a scene by examining three dimensions of scenes: centrality, concentration, and visibility.

Social Movement Cultures

Beginning with the Chicago School in the early twentieth century, sociologists have explored micro-worlds ranging from gangs to dance halls, punk clubs to discos, and jazz clubs to gothic music scenes. Sociologist John Irwin (1973, 1977) undertook the first attempt to conceptualize scenes, first in a journal article about surfing and later in a book. Scholars have used the concept of a “scene” to study expressive, lifestyle scenes, focusing on style, consumerism, leisure, and aesthetics (see Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Bennett and Peterson 2004; Hall and Jefferson 1975; Hebdige 1979; Irwin 1977; Lloyd 2006; Muggleton 2005; Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003; and Straw 2004). In the 1990s, a small group of cultural studies scholars advocated a theoretical shift from studying subcultures, which they viewed as static and homogeneous, to a study of something more dynamic (see, e.g., Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004; Hesmondhalgh 2005; and Muggleton and Weinzierl 2003). These scholars emphasize the “sociospatial aspects” of scenes—“allusions to flexibility and transience, of temporary, ad hoc and strategic associations, a cultural space notable as much for its restricted as well as its porous sociality, its connotations of flux and flow, movement and mutability”—and made the concept more appealing for capturing the dynamics of these micro-worlds (Stahl 2004, 53).

Using the concept of a scene as a starting point, sociologists Darcy Leach and Sebastian Haunss (2009, 260) coined the term “social movement scene” (see also Creasap 2012, 2016). Not all social movements develop scenes. Scenes are important to movements “for whom defending, creating, and/or promoting a marginalized, repressed, or countercultural way of life is an essential aspect of their political praxis” (Leach and Haunss 2009, 273). In Europe and the United States, these include radical feminist, gay and lesbian, and an-
archist movements on the political left and white power skinhead and neo-Nazi movements on the political right (Simi and Futrell 2010).

Scholars of new social movements have described social movement cultures using terms such as “free spaces” (Couto 1993; Evans and Boyte 1992; Polletta 1999), “submerged networks” (Melucci 1989), “safe spaces” (Gamson 1997), and “cultural havens,” among others (Fantasia and Hirsch 1995). Free spaces are “small-scale settings within a community or movement that are removed from the direct control of dominant groups, are voluntarily participated in, and generate the cultural challenge that precedes or accompanies political mobilization” (Polletta 1999, 1). As Leach and Haunss (2009) point out, a social movement scene shares characteristics with these ideas, but there is little uniformity in how the structures of these cultural spaces are defined. Some analyses refer to single places (Chatterton 2010; Glass 2010), while others include cyber networks (Kahn and Kellner 2004) and/or informal parties (Simi and Futrell 2010). Leach and Haunss (2009, 259) have written a lengthy discussion distinguishing scenes from these other concepts, particularly free spaces. They conclude that a scene can be described as “a network of free spaces that encompasses one or more subcultures and/or countercultures.” This is what sociologist Walter Nicholls (2009, 88) refers to as “places of resistance strung together to form a relatively coherent social movement space.” According to these definitions, social centers, infoshops, and coffeehouses are individual free spaces. The relationships, events, and activities that connect these spaces are what constitute a scene. Therefore, a single place would not constitute a scene. A scene must include several places that are in some way connected to one another and to social movements.

Leach and Haunss (2009) offer a compelling start to the study of social movement scenes, but they tend to paint a picture of a rather stable entity and focus on what functions scenes serve for social movements, such as fostering mobilization, providing a point of entry into a movement, and whether scenes help or hinder a movement’s political and/or cultural influence. While their definition of a scene as networks of people and places is useful and scenes may well benefit movements in the ways they describe, I propose that thinking of scenes as processes is more useful than thinking of them solely as
stable contexts where political activity happens (Creasap 2012, 2016). The dynamic energy and movement evoked by the term “scene” is what prompted scholars to move away from models of subculture, which tend to be overly structural and insufficiently interactional, and toward a study of scenes (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004). Scenes are works in progress. They are never final but always coming and going. The processes of “making a scene”—through challenges to who “belongs” in public (and in some cases, private) spaces, rituals like music and protest, and everyday practices—are political work. This is not to say that the scene is the entire movement; not all people who participate in movements necessarily hang out in the scene. Conversely, not all people who hang out in the scene identify as part of a movement. Scenes and movements intersect, but they are not one and the same (Creasap 2012; Haunss and Leach 2007).

The concept of a scene shares commonalities with the concept of a social movement community (SMC) (Staggenborg 1998, 2013) but differs in important ways. Like SMCs, scenes are conceptually useful for “look[ing] for movements in a wide variety of places” (Staggenborg 2013, 141). The conceptual distinction between SMCs and scenes is an emphasis on territoriality and spatial dynamics. SMCs are “not necessarily territorial, but [involve] human relations, which may be maintained through social networks rather than physical locale” (Staggenborg 1998, 182). For urban social movements, place is deeply important for structuring social interactions, relationships, and social movement action. Part of how they understand their collective identity is as inhabitants of a neighborhood or city, so territorial claims are vitally important to their movements (Creasap 2016). The concept of a social movement scene, which includes a network of places as a fundamental element, allows scholars to attend to the effects of the spatial arrangements of social movements.

Scenes also share some features of “abeyance structures” (Taylor 1989), but not always. Abeyance refers to “a holding process by which movements sustain themselves in nonreceptive political environments and provide continuity from one stage of mobilization to another” (Taylor 1989, 761). This idea applies in the case of Stockholm, where activists talked about needing places to sustain the collective energy generated in temporary spaces and at one-off events. But in the case of Malmö, the idea of an abeyance structure does not
fit. The idea of a “holding process” between mobilizations assumes that public challenges to authority (e.g., demonstrations, legislative challenges) are what constitute activism. Urban movements operate under the assumption that creating new ways of everyday life is activism. This was especially the case in Malmö, where the scene helped movements make activism a part of everyday life. In this way, scenes facilitated ongoing activism, not only a structure that facilitated mass mobilizations or provided a means of being involved in a movement between periods of protest activity.

As structures that may be fleeting or that last for years, scenes are also temporally defined. Social movements in this book draw on the histories of social movements, express urgency about their places in the present, and seek to build strong scenes in order to create reach—a temporal extension into the future. A group’s orientation to the future—even if that future does not come true—shapes action in the present (Blee 2012, 2013; Creasap 2020; Emirbayer and Mische 1998; Mische 2009). As sites of experimentation and deliberation, social movement scenes provide many opportunities to observe “sites of hyper-projectivity,” that is, arenas of heightened, future-oriented public debate about contending futures” (Mische 2014, 438). For example, volition refers to motion in relation to the future; do groups see themselves as moving toward the future (e.g., active agents of change, as in Malmö) or do they see the future as moving toward them (e.g., responding to a crisis, as in Göteborg)? Orientation to these dimensions of projectivity shapes action and, in turn, shapes the scene.

**Taking Up Space**

**The Right to the City**

Rooted in the work of French social theorist Henri Lefebvre ([1968] 1996), sociospatial perspectives on social movements integrate analyses of social life with political economies of cities (see Domaradzka 2018; Harvey 2012; Martin 2015; Martínez López 2018; Nicholls, Miller, and Beaumont 2013; and Yip, López, and Sun 2019 for overviews). Lefebvre recognized that urban movements, for which “the transformation of daily urban life” was a goal, are crucial to imagining and remaking urban space (Harvey 2012, xvi). In Lefebvrian terms, social movement scenes are perceived spaces—space as it is
experienced in everyday life by inhabitants. Lefebvre argued that the city itself is an *oeuvre*, a work of art collectively forged by humans throughout its history; the “artists” are urban residents and their everyday routines. This view of the urban, Lefebvre argued, conflicts with the modern capitalist city, where “the corporate system regulates the distribution of actions and activities over urban space (streets and neighborhoods)” (Lefebvre [1968] 1996, 68). Lefebvre does not define the right to political participation in terms of national citizenship, elected officials, or the structures of state and local governments; it is those who inhabit urban communities—what he calls citadins (a combination of citizen and denizen)—who should have a voice in all decisions that affect the production of urban space. Lefebvre does not explicitly state that inhabitants should entirely and solely make decisions about their communities, but the right to the city “would give urban inhabitants a literal seat at the corporate table” (Purcell 2002, 102; see also Attah 2011 and Gilbert and Dikeç 2008).

Social movement scenes, produced by activists by appropriating space and creating opportunities for democratic forms of participation, are an expression of the right to the city. According to Lefebvre ([1968] 1996), city inhabitants have two main rights: the right to participation in the production of urban space and the right to appropriation of urban space. The former is relatively straightforward; city inhabitants should be able to participate fully in any decision-making processes that involve city space. The right of appropriation relies on a Marxist distinction between *use value* and *exchange value*, calling on inhabitants to prioritize a city’s use value (satisfying human needs or desires) over its exchange value (a commodity for exchange). This distinction becomes muddied in the context of entrepreneurial urbanism, where culture and creativity—which are, to some extent, satisfying for human desires—become marketable (Florida 2002, 2013, 2017). Unlike previous well-known cultural districts (e.g., Montmartre in Paris, SoHo in New York), which “emerged spontaneously from currents of dissent, conflict, and collision,” contemporary cultural districts are “sequestered in artificially-created zone[s]” by city officials (Leslie 2005, 405). In order to stay competitive in a post-industrial era, city governments must do whatever they can to attract wealthy investors, residents, tourists, and developers (Bryson 2013).
Critical scholars regard such entrepreneurial strategies as gentrification with a cool, artsy façade (Peck 2005; Slater 2006; Bryson 2013). Gentrification is “a gradual process, occurring one block or one building at a time, slowly reconfiguring the neighborhood landscape of consumption and residence” (Pérez 2004, 139). New amenities designed to attract young, urbane professionals become progenitors of commercial gentrification (Lees 2003). Many scholarly studies focus on the effects of gentrification, such as displacement of poor and working-class residents (Betancur 2011; Levy, Comey, and Padilla 2006; Newman and Wyly 2006; Pérez 2004), changes in housing tenure (Hedin et al. 2012; Watt 2009), or adaptive reuse of old buildings for upscale commercial places (Wang 2011; Zukin et al. 2009). Fewer studies examine how people who live in gentrifying neighborhoods resist these changes (for notable exceptions, see Annunziata and Rivas-Alonso 2020; King and Lowe 2018; and Pearsall 2013).

Studying scenes requires attention to the tight interplay between how movement actors construct scenes and the political, social, and cultural environments in which they operate. For example, the relationship between urban movements and gentrification depends on local political dynamics (Martínez 2020). A study of squatting in Amsterdam and New York indicates that squatters spurred gentrification early on by making visible claims on territory and generating media attention (Pruijt 2003). The culture that urban movements create in a neighborhood can then be framed by urban developers to appeal to creative middle- and upper-class professionals. Squatters in these cases mitigated these effects by siding with original inhabitants to fight development efforts; although movement actors may have more social and cultural capital than other neighborhood residents, they often share a lack of economic capital that can serve as a source of solidarity (Pruijt 2003). This did not stop gentrification but may have slowed the process. In the Prenzlauer Berg neighborhood in East Berlin, squatters sought legalization of their spaces after the fall of the Berlin Wall, thereby securing their place in the neighborhood at an advantageous time. Although squatters opposed gentrification, they worked with the city government in order to maintain and secure their status as legal squats. In doing so, they secured rents well below market price, which slowed gentrification in the area (Holm and Kuhn 2017). These examples show just how crucial
timing, relationships, and local political contexts are to the effects of urban social movements.

Social movement scenes throughout Europe have become increasingly fragile as a result of neoliberal urbanism that characterizes twenty-first-century cities. Since the mid-2000s, autonomous movements in Copenhagen, Amsterdam, and Berlin have been evicted from squatted social centers by city authorities to make way for commercial ventures (Creasap 2012; Martínez 2020). As a result, autonomous movements have been fighting to maintain their place in the urban landscape. For these movements, there is more at stake than cheap real estate (though this is certainly important). Autonomous movements take space in protest of the “corporate city,” which represents “the high end of growth, the cultural hegemony of finance and the standardization of individual desire” (Zukin 2009, 545). Social movement scenes represent a return to the “urban village . . . the low-key and often low-income neighborhood, the culture of ethnic and social class solidarity, and the dream of restoring a ruptured community” (Zukin 2009, 546). Autonomous responses to gentrification and privatization of public space are both symbolic (a rejection of corporate values) and practical (offering an affordable alternative to consumers or residents). Taking up space in these neighborhoods is viewed by activists as a means of reclaiming (or protecting) deindustrialized, working-class neighborhoods from corporate housing developers and/or governmental control.

Spatial Dimensions of Scenes
Sociospatial perspectives, found in a rich body of geographical and urban studies research on social movements, are necessary for understanding scenes as spatial entities. Urban sociologists, geographers, and historians have produced much work about what we can call social movement scenes, using Leach and Haunss’s (2009) definition. However, many of these examples offer “descriptors for some form of provisional unity” (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 125) rather than conceptualizations of sociospatial structures. Scholars of the American feminist movement of the 1970s have shown how the movement inhabited networks of free spaces in American cities, including bars, bookstores, parks, health clinics, and rape crisis centers (Enke 2007; Spain 2016). Scholarship on contemporary labor movements shows
how “labor and community coalitions move outside the workplace to social halls, church basements, and pubs to organize around issues of joint concern” (Greenberg and Lewis 2017). Historian Tom Goyens (2009, 445) describes “seemingly ordinary places [that] were, in effect, a network, an alternative space carved in the dominant, capitalist space of the metropolis” by German anarchists living in New York in the early twentieth century. Italian sociologist Vincenzo Ruggiero (2001, 112) paints a clear picture of a scene as “participating in the same events and, at times, sharing specific places and spaces in the city . . . [including] small ‘alternative’ restaurants, coffee shops, bookshops, bars, [and] also just squares and junctions.” Even though these scholars do not use the term “scene,” these descriptions include politically like-minded people (autonomists, labor activists, feminists, anarchists) who frequent a network of physical places that are in some way cultural “alternatives.” These examples show that scenes are important to spatial analyses of social movements, but—as is the case in social movement studies—lack uniformity in how these structures are defined (see also Arampatzi 2017).

Scenes share some conceptual ground with geographical assemblages. “Assemblage” refers broadly to “a composition of diverse elements [that] form [a] provisional socio-spatial formation” (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 124; see also Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Davies 2012; and McFarlane 2009). A social movement scene, then, is an assemblage of places, movements, and activists that form a coherent structure. However, the word “provisional” is key in the definition of an assemblage because it indicates a temporal element as well as a spatial one (Anderson and McFarlane 2011). Part of the conceptual promise of a “scene” lies in its malleability, flow, and flux; elements of a scene—like those of movements—coalesce, disperse, realign, move, and morph.

An important contribution of this book is to add specificity to the concept of a social movement scene. Specifically, I present three dimensions of scenes in this book: centrality (relative to the central business district), concentration (clustering of scene places in one area of the city), and visibility (a visible presence communicated by signs and symbols). Geographers and urban studies scholars have written about networks of places ranging from town squares to coffee-houses to softball fields (see, e.g., Enke 2007; Greenberg and Lewis
2017; and Spain 2016), but these tend to be mainly descriptive rather than conceptual, leaving many questions about how to think about scenes as spatial structures. Shaped by social movements and the political economies of cities, scenes vary along each of these dimensions to produce different scene structures. These dimensions and scene structures are based on deductive analysis of existing scene studies and inductive analysis of my research on social movement scenes in Swedish cities. These dimensions are not exhaustive, but they add specificity to the concept while remaining dynamic enough to apply to a wide variety of scene structures and locales.

Concentration is important for any type of scene. Scenes are networks of people and places. Therefore, proximity creates opportunities for different people and groups to interact with one another and “a stable base exists for repeated collaborations” (Nicholls 2009, 84). However, the relative importance of centrality and visibility differs in other local contexts. These dimensions, which are rooted in territoriality and power, are especially important for understanding scenes in changing neighborhoods. In gentrifying neighborhoods, several groups—original inhabitants, new inhabitants, developers, activists, property owners, city authorities—battle for territorial control.

Centrality refers to proximity to the central business district (CBD) of a city. City centers are “commercial, religious, intellectual, political and economic” hubs that draw people from the suburbs and beyond (Lefebvre [1968] 1996, 73). In changing neighborhoods, urban movements seek to change the built environment, social fabric, and political processes of cities, making proximity to centers of decision making crucial. Pragmatically, centrality allows greater access to meeting places and activities. European squatting movements “aim at locating [squatted social centers] in the most convenient buildings and urban areas for people to gather, meet, and develop activities . . . [When] squatting for housing, the centrality issue may be less relevant” (Martínez López 2018, 13; see also Adinolfi 2019). By contrast, Parisian autonomous social centers are in the city’s eastern suburbs. Strategically, Parisian movements sought to “maintain a maximum distance from the state as well as from the institutional way of living in urban spaces. As a result, they are hostile to public authorities, considering them their major enemy” (Aguilera 2018, 131). In this case, centrality is strategically avoided by the group. This is a good
example of how social movement strategy is tightly linked with local environments.

Visibility refers to a scene with a visible presence indicated by signs and symbols. In gentrifying neighborhoods, a number of groups wage territorial and discursive battles to define a neighborhood as “theirs.” In the absence of formal control, visibly marking territory is a way of claiming space (see, e.g., De Backer 2019 and Pecile 2017). For autonomous movements, this includes claiming territory with fly-posting, graffiti, stickers, and activist-produced media. In a study of fly-posting in Rome and Berlin, sociologist Paulo Gerbaudo (2014) writes that “fly-posting in the autonomous scene should be understood fundamentally as a practice of diffuse boundary-making, constructing a sense of antagonistic territoriality around the movement strongholds” (246). Through these practices, autonomous movements lay claim to walls, streets, and squares. These practices are often illegal. In Hamburg, Germany, autonomous movements in the central neighborhood Sternschanze used a “de-attraction” strategy aimed at showing would-be gentrifiers that they were not welcome. They used “arson and vandalism . . . against . . . symbols of capitalist wealth” like new shops, condominiums, chain restaurants, and banks in order to promote a negative image of the neighborhood to potential gentrifiers (Naegler 2012, 81). This also had the effect of making visible, even spectacular, claims on territory. These actions signaled that the rules and laws of the city did not matter to activists because they claimed the territory as their own, rejecting property rights and state control of public space. An effect of gentrification is that groups threatened with displacement must fight for visibility even more (Pell 2014).

“Why Sweden?” Welfare Retrenchment and Neoliberal Urbanism

The question I am asked most frequently about this research is “why Sweden?” People ask this question for a variety of reasons ranging

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2. See also Gibril (2018) for a similar discussion on the use of graffiti and street art during the Egyptian Revolution.
from curiosity to skepticism. The curious want to know about the people and character of a small, northern nation with a reputation for beauty and equality. The skeptics question what kind of grievances social movements might have in such a place. In response, I often find myself quoting the late geographer Allan Pred (2000) as I report that one does not have to look very hard to find social problems even in Sweden.

The questions of skeptics and Pred’s use of the word “even” imply that Sweden holds a place in the popular imagination as exceptional. As Pred wrote, the country is “stereotyped by Western intellectuals and progressives as a paradise of social enlightenment, as an international champion of social justice, as the very model of solidarity and equality, as the world’s capital of good intentions and civilized behavior toward others” (Pred 2000, 6). Pred argued that the beliefs embedded in this stereotype—moral superiority and intolerance of injustice—are what allow Swedish racism and ethnocentrism to persist.

Stereotypes about Sweden are based on outdated notions of a strong Swedish welfare state and ignore the “slow and deliberate dismantling” of welfare policies over the past forty-five years (Sernhede, Thörn, and Thörn 2016, 157). Neoliberal policy has increasingly shaped urban governance in Sweden since an economic crisis in the 1970s. Economic crisis in the 1970s led social democratic leaders to seek out market-based solutions, and welfare retrenchment led by a center-right government began in earnest during a national financial crisis in the early 1990s (see Chapter 2 for full discussion). In 1991 the government abolished the Ministry of Housing and introduced measures to privatize public housing (Andersson and Turner 2014; Christophers 2013; Hedin et al. 2012; Sernhede, Thörn, and Thörn 2016).

These changes in housing policy were critical for two reasons: first, this was a pivotal moment in welfare retrenchment. Affordable housing had been “a pillar of the Swedish democratic welfare state, catering as it did to basic needs of the broad working and middle classes,” but when Social Democrats came back into power in 1994,
they did not reconstruct pre-1991 housing policy (Hedin et al 2012, 444). Second, in the absence of support from the state, cities become entrepreneurial to find new sources of funding (Lauermann 2018). Changes in housing policy allowed for tenure conversion—the shift from rental properties to cooperative market-based housing. In addition to spurring competition among middle- and upper-class buyers, it also contributed to deepening class segregation in Sweden’s major cities (Thörn and Thörn 2017). The combination of welfare retrenchment and increasingly competitive housing markets paved the way for gentrification in Sweden’s city centers.

Sweden’s Major Cities

Like many cities around the globe, Sweden’s three major cities (Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö) followed a trajectory of deindustrialization. Each city is home to similar post-industrial neighborhoods: Södermalm in Stockholm, Haga in Göteborg, and Möllevången in Malmö. As I discuss in Chapter 3, these neighborhoods hold significant symbolic power for urban autonomous movements. They were all working-class industrial centers and labor movement strongholds that transformed to gentrified centers for an upwardly mobile middle class. However, this process happened at different rates and in different decades, making a comparison of the three useful for understanding change over time. Gentrification began in Södermalm in the 1970s, urban activists battled to “save Haga” in the 1980s, and Möllevången began seeing indications of gentrification in the early 2000s. To urban social movement actors, this not only means that they are pushed out of city centers but also represents a symbolic erasure of the labor movement gains that came before them.

Malmö, where I begin this book, is Sweden’s third-largest city with a population of approximately 340,000 residents (Malmö Stad 2019). Part of Denmark until the mid-seventeenth century, Malmö became an important port in northern Europe in the 1850s and home to major textile industries around the turn of the twentieth century. Owing to its history as a major industrial center, Malmö is home to the robust Swedish labor movement. An economic recession in the mid-1970s hurt the manufacturing industry in the city, and a decade later, the Kockums shipyard—one of the largest in Europe—closed,
marking the beginnings of industrial decline in the city. In the mid-to late 1990s, the city began to revamp its image as a center of creativity and knowledge, due in part to the opening of Malmö University in 1998. Today Malmö markets itself as a creative, eco-friendly city, sometimes branding itself as part of the cross-border Øresund region with Copenhagen, Denmark (Falkheimer 2016).

Located on the east coast, Stockholm is Sweden’s largest city and capital, with a population of more than 960,000 (Stockholms Stad 2020). The city is situated on fourteen islands where Lake Mälaren meets the Baltic Sea and consists of three major areas: the city center, south Stockholm, and west Stockholm. The city center is made up of four major boroughs, including Södermalm (“Söder”), the southern-most borough. Söder was an industrial and working-class borough from the late nineteenth century until the 1970s, when rent regulations changed and industry declined (Franzén 2005). As is the case in many Swedish cities, neighborhoods are class-bound. The closer one lives to the centrum or city center, the wealthier one is likely to be. As one moves farther away from the city center, the socioeconomic and occupational statuses of residents drop, precisely the opposite of many American cities (Popenoe 2001). After putting up a fight for territory in Södermalm in the 1970s and ’80s, urban movements have also followed this pattern, moving into the southern suburbs as rents in Söder increased and space became less available.

Göteborg is Sweden’s second-largest city, with a population of approximately 500,000. The city has a long history of trade and shipping, beginning with the East India Company in the early eighteenth century. As a result, the city was once home to a large shipbuilding industry, until the 1980s when it went into decline. Today, automobile manufacturing is an important industry in the city, and Volvo is the city’s largest employer. Though trade union activity is widespread throughout Sweden, there is a long history of labor movement activity in Göteborg, which has long depended on manufacturing jobs to drive its economy. Like Möllevången/Malmö and Södermalm/Stockholm, Haga was an important place to urban social movements in Göteborg’s past. A labor movement stronghold in the 1920s, the neighborhood followed a familiar decline alongside
industrial decline and was slated for demolition in the 1960s. Urban movements emerged to “save Haga,” which they did by reversing Haga’s reputation from a slum to a place imbued with historical value (H. Thörn 2012b).

Gentrification in all three cities was primarily framed by activists in terms of social class, not ethnicity. This might seem especially surprising in Möllevången/Malmö given the multiethnic character that one observes on the streets of the neighborhood, from the several Middle Eastern and Asian grocery stores that dot the streets, the plethora of falafel stands, and the accented Swedish of the men working at the farmers’ market in Möllevångstorget. Yet activists across Sweden during this period used anti-capitalist frames aimed at creating a collective working-class identity in order to “organize the neighborhood” (Jämte, Lundstedt, and Wennerhag 2020). Activists in all cities were also responding to visible changes in the neighborhood: new builds, changes in housing tenure, rising rents, and new amenities geared toward middle-class clientele. Though in Göteborg and Stockholm, gentrification was already a complete process ahead of large waves of immigration, change was still visibly under way in Malmö. Statistical data on Möllevången support activist observations. Between the years 2000 and 2018, the population of Möllevången got younger, wealthier, and more educated, and conversion of rental properties to co-op or individually owned properties doubled. Yet the population of people with a “foreign background” (utländsk bakgrund) remained steady (Malmö Stad 2000, 2008, 2019). This may partially explain why Malmö activists chose a class-based framing of gentrification. Some interviewees also suggested that Middle Eastern, Eastern European, and Asian shop owners were part of the bourgeoisie, and therefore not part of the working-class frame. Instead, they said, working-class ethnic enclaves were located in the Rosengård district.\footnote{This is how city statistical reports identify people born outside the Nordic region.\footnote{When asked about ethnic segregation, activists pointed to Rosengård, an immigrant enclave on the outer edge of the city where 60 percent of the population consists of people with a “foreign background.” They did not frame gentrification in Möllevången as increasing ethnic segregation.}}
Stockholm, Malmö, and Göteborg share neighborhoods with similar industrial histories, labor movement ties, and gentrification patterns. Yet the processes and pace of neighborhood change happened over different periods of time, making comparison a useful tool for understanding how social movement geographies shape and are shaped by gentrification processes in the short and long term. During my fieldwork this was especially true, as autonomous social movements turned attention to “the local” and made visible, territorial claims on urban space.

Notes on Ethnography and Comparative Study

This book draws on fourteen months of ethnographic research in Stockholm, Göteborg, and Malmö, Sweden between 2009 and 2011 (and a follow-up visit in 2016). This was a key period for studying urban movements in Sweden as a squatting wave swept the country and urban action groups were popping up everywhere (see Chapter 5). By 2016, many of the scene locations I studied had closed, had relocated to new spaces, or were embroiled in disputes with municipal authorities or landlords. At the time of this writing, Cyklopen, in the Stockholm suburbs, is the only social center presented in this book that is still active. This is the nature of studying scenes. As sociospatial structures, they are always in flux, striving for temporal reach. Studying them is like capturing a snapshot.

As I detail in the Appendix, I took field notes at locations that drew a cross-section of social movement actors: community meetings, street festivals, public parks, building sites, and scene locations (bookstores, squats, etc.). I supplemented these observations with formal interviews of thirty-eight autonomous movement actors (twenty-six men, twelve women) and informal conversations with many more. Activists ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-six, with most in their late twenties and early thirties, and for most, working in scene places were full-time jobs. I also conducted textual analyses of archival materials and newspapers in Göteborg in 2010 and Stockholm in 2016 as well as hundreds of pieces of activist media and ephemera.

Given the comparative nature of my research, my field notes reflect a phased approach (Maxwell 2012) to comparative case study. I
initially intended to study scenes in Stockholm and Göteborg, but my research in those two cities led me to Malmö. Therefore, this research unfolded in phases, beginning with longer case studies of scenes in Stockholm and Göteborg and followed by multiple short periods of fieldwork in Malmö. The phased approach allowed me to refine my theoretical understandings of scenes as I moved from one place to another. This approach was also practical since the scenes in Stockholm and Göteborg were more difficult to find and the scene in Malmö was so vibrant and easily accessible.

The combination of ethnographic methods and comparative study of three sites is ideal for understanding the interplay of culture and political economy. Interviews and ethnographic observations combined to capture social dynamics of scenes that might not be evident otherwise. For instance, in interviews about the social center Cyklopen in greater Stockholm, people often cited that it was “the most gender equitable building site in history.” However, I noticed that most of the activists representing Cyklopen in public meetings were men. When I asked interviewees about this, I learned that the group had suffered schisms along gender lines that had fractured the group. I began asking this question in other places and found that social centers were highly masculine spaces despite their expressed commitments to gender equality and feminist politics. In Malmö, the social center Utkanten held “woman-separatist” Thursdays to encourage women’s participation in the space. These examples revealed how activists made sense of inequalities within spaces that prided themselves on egalitarianism.

Comparative study of three different cities reveals not only the variety of ways in which social movement scenes are spatially organized but also some of the driving factors behind why scenes thrive or fizzle. For example, had I only studied Stockholm or Göteborg, we might not understand how social movement scenes can thrive in gentrifying neighborhoods. The narratives in the larger cities were that gentrification equals the death of urban movements. This is not completely untrue, as gentrification does appear to portend an eventual end to urban movement scenes. But the Malmö scene also shows us that, at various stages of the gentrification process, urban movements can create opportunities for neighborhood residents to claim space (both physical and discursive); use creative tactics to include as
many residents as possible in conversations about the future of their neighborhood; and diffuse the practices of the scene to a wide variety of people. This holds promise for creating more participatory forms of urban development and for slowing the processes of gentrification. In the words of the ever-eloquent David Harvey (2012), “we do not have to wait upon the grand revolution to constitute [democratic] spaces” (xiv).

Road Map: Organization of the Book

Chapter 2 offers an overview of Swedish political culture and social movement histories to situate autonomous movements in national and historical contexts. I trace the history of Swedish urban movements from their roots in neighborhood movements (byalagsrörelser) of the 1960s, aimed at preserving historic buildings, through their transformation into more confrontational movements associated with squatting, black blocs, and anarchism. Swedish autonomists challenge nationally accepted approaches to culture and politics by rejecting representative democracy and voluntary association membership, the cornerstones of Swedish political culture.

Chapter 3 looks at how social centers—often the cultural hubs of scenes—are both prefigurative spaces where people imagine a future society and spaces in which people seek to preserve the past. Social centers are prefigurative places where people are encouraged to make their own rules. This contrasts greatly with the formal, bureaucratic processes that characterize Swedish political culture. Represented by the unofficial squatters’ slogan “Sweden Ends Here,” activists seek to distance themselves from notions of “Swedishness” that emphasize order, bureaucracy, and conformity. At the same time, activists draw on the traditions of an Old Left that is distinctly Swedish as they build social centers. Labor movements of the late nineteenth century created libraries, cultural centers, educational institutions, theaters, and parks to serve the cultural, educational, and recreational needs of workers. This is a culture that contemporary activists admire, and they attempt to re-create a similar style of movement culture—albeit one infused with contemporary political issues and a punk rock aesthetic.

In Chapters 4 and 5, I look at the relationship between scenes and city space to consider how scenes become embedded as part of
everyday life (as in Malmö) or fail to become part of the fabric of urban neighborhoods (as in Göteborg and Stockholm). In Chapter 4, I show how the right to the city is used as a vehicle for diffusing autonomous movement culture into a neighborhood more generally. The rights to appropriation of space and participation in decision-making processes about how space is used are enacted through the projects and places of the scene in Malmö. This, in turn, reinforces the scene by strengthening bonds between people and spurring development of more autonomous places. These actions are partially enabled by the fact that Möllevången, the neighborhood in which they operate, is structurally conducive to the development of a social movement scene. The neighborhood is centrally located, making activism visible, and nationally recognized as a hub of cultural and political activity. The neighborhood remains relatively affordable and accessible to activists, artists, and students (for the time being). There is a constellation of places that are in close proximity to one another, allowing for routine social interactions. Taken together, these attributes and efforts create a sense of durability for the scene in Malmö. Activists’ efforts are limited in some ways, such as social control by landlords and city authorities; rising rents in the neighborhood that make accessing space difficult or impossible; and competing notions of what constitutes politics, culture, and protest. However—for the time being—the scene gives autonomous practices a visible, everyday presence in the lives of Malmö residents.

In Chapter 5, I turn to Stockholm and Göteborg to consider what happens when scenes are not as central, concentrated, or visible. In the two larger cities, there are similar social movements as those in Malmö, but different social movement scenes. Scenes in Stockholm and Göteborg coalesce around temporary spaces in suburban areas, which gives them a more fleeting character. These cases highlight the importance of physical space for bringing people together. In Stockholm, a lack of centrality, visibility, and concentration of places contributes to the lack of a sense of connection and community among activists. In Göteborg, scene places are concentrated, but they are difficult to find. Although some factors make Malmö structurally conducive to the development of scenes, that is not the case in Stockholm and Göteborg. Social movements in the larger cities operate primarily in temporary spaces, which influences how activists see
the future. Because they view places as lending durability and stability to a movement, they do not see temporary spaces as having future reach, thereby limiting their impact on social change.

The concluding chapter ties the book’s arguments together to consider how social movements are shaped by urban development and effect change in the urban landscape, and how scenes bring vitality and momentum to movements. I reflect on the interplay of structure and agency to consider how the spatial aspects of social movements shape activists’ visions for the future. Making a Scene encourages scholars to think critically about spatiality in the sociology of social movements and the role of social movements as important actors in urban development.