



The right to stay put: resistance and organizing in the wake of changing housing policies in Sweden

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Abstract

Tenants in Sweden increasingly face rising rents and displacement due to decades of ongoing housing deregulation. In this text, we explore different manifestations of these injustices, and reflect upon consequences and responses as they crystalize locally. By visiting the three cities of Stockholm, Malmö and Uppsala, we highlight three different examples of how tenants respond and formulate protests vis-a-vis privatization through tenure conversion (Stockholm), gentrification spurred by private rental actors (Malmö) and battles over green space and displacement in the rental housing stock (Uppsala). These vignettes exemplify how policy changes play out in different local settings and illustrate how resistance manifests itself on the ground.

Keywords

rental housing, neoliberalization, renovation, housing struggles, Sweden

Introduction

In January 2019, the recently elected Swedish government proposed to open the public rental housing sector to market rents (Sveriges Television, 2019). Just a few years prior, such a suggestion would have been 'politically unthinkable', as all political parties have been

united, since WWII, in the welfare ambition of providing decent housing for all via a system of collectively negotiated rents and legislation protecting tenants' rights.

This new position, calling for market rents, interlocks with three decades of housing deregulation in the country, a process that has transformed Sweden's internationally renowned housing policy, with its welfare intentions of tenure neutrality and high-quality housing for all, into a 'monstrous hybrid' of residual protective legislation and neoliberal deregulation (Christophers, 2013). Today, privatization and renovation of rental housing have conspired to increase housing inequalities across the country. The previous endeavours of universal housing provision have progressively transformed and instead, policy ploughs the way for ramping socio-economic and spatial inequalities.

In this text, we explore different manifestations of these changes, and reflect upon consequences and responses as they crystalize locally. By visiting the three cities of Stockholm, Malmö and Uppsala (respectively the first, third and fourth largest cities in Sweden), we highlight three different examples of how tenants respond and formulate protests vis-a-vis privatization through tenure conversion (Stockholm), gentrification spurred by private rental actors (Malmö) and battles over green space and displacement in the rental housing stock (Uppsala). The situation in each city exemplifies how policy changes play out locally on the ground as well as illustrates how resistance manifests in different places.

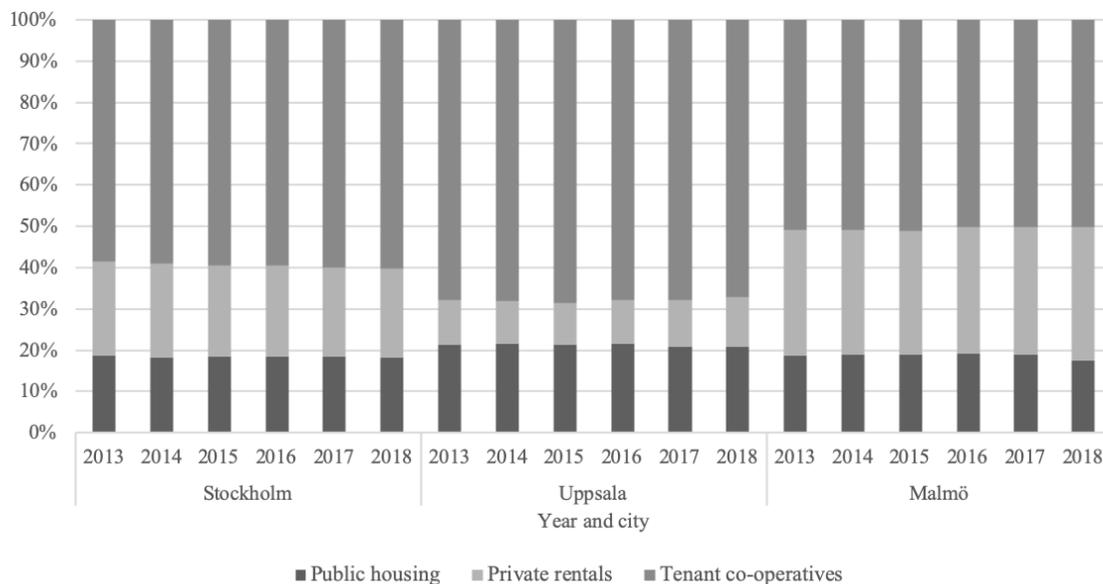
Rental housing in Sweden consists of two tenure forms: private and public. Municipally owned public housing companies have historically been a cornerstone of the universal housing regime, commissioned by the government to provide affordable housing to the general population. Also, a national system of collectively negotiated rents has been important to protect tenants from sharply increasing rent and evictions in public as well as private rental housing.

Between the 1970s and the beginning of the 2000s, the proportion of public housing was relatively stable at 20-25 per cent of the housing stock. Yet, between 2005 and 2011 (Bengtsson, 2013) the proportion of public housing decreased from 22 per cent to 18 per cent due to tenure conversion of rental housing to tenant co-operatives, mainly carried out in the Stockholm region. In parallel, the private rental housing stock has remained around the same size. Figure 1 shows the (slightly varying) tenure composition in Stockholm, Uppsala and Malmö for multifamily housing stocks.

Today, housing policy and practices in Sweden are unfolding an increasingly unjust housing provision system where race, gender, age and class increasingly matter in the struggle of finding decent housing. These inequities stretch beyond a question of the shortage of affordable housing in the city regions (Boverket, 2014) and include, amongst other aspects, an informal housing market, discrimination, increasing costs of living and an overall deepened precariousness for tenants, especially for those already on the margins (e.g. Listerborn 2018; Baeten et al., 2016).

Figure 1

Proportion of public and private rental housing, and tenant co-operatives in multifamily housing, 2013-2018. **Source: Statistics Sweden 2018**



In recent years, *renoviction* has become an important strategy for profit accumulation among Swedish rental housing owners (Baeten et al., 2016; Westin, 2011). The word *renoviction* was originally coined by activists in Vancouver, and refers to a phenomenon through which renovation processes in rental housing are linked to substantial rent increases, forcing tenants to move from their homes as they cannot afford the higher living costs. In this way, those without sufficient means are effectively displaced (Westin, 2011). In Sweden, a building boom in the 1960s produced one million dwellings in a period of only ten years. As a consequence of years of neglected maintenance, an estimated 400.000 of these dwellings are currently in need of structural renovation of their electrical, water and waste systems, leading to the emergence of a pattern of *renovictions*. This is indirectly enabled by Swedish legislation, which sets rent levels mainly according to an apartment's 'standard' and does not allow for rent increases to undertake necessary maintenance. To trigger rent increases, housing companies implement both the necessary systems maintenance and "standard increments" such as adding wooden floors, towel heaters, bathroom tiling, security doors, and new kitchens (often of lower quality).

Sharp rises in rent in large and middle-sized cities have put into motion a wave of displacements. It is reported by state agencies that these mainly impact elderly, single-parent homes, part-time workers and tenants on social welfare (Boverket, 2014). Consequently, state and civil society reports have observed deepened segregation, overcrowded living and an increased risk of having to move home several times. The Swedish Union of Tenants has cautioned that one third of tenants in the country, as a consequence of *renoviction* processes, risk ending up in homes of standards below "reasonable living conditions" (Hyresgästföreningen, 2017).

The rental housing market in Sweden has changed due to a reform of public housing policy in 2011 (Allbolagen). This legislation pushed public housing companies to act ‘business-like’, as opposed to the welfare state responsibility of providing social security and good quality housing for all (Grander, 2017). Subsequently, public housing companies have sold significant amounts of their housing stock to large financial actors such as Blackstone, Stena, Rikshem, Victoria Park, Heimstaden and Ikano. These have been shown to mainly prioritize cheap “standard raising” measures over necessary but expensive structural maintenance (e.g. Pull & Richard, 2019; Olsén & Björkvald, 2019).

These changes within the housing sector have not remained unchallenged, as tenants and the homeless increasingly advocate for their right to stay put. Local networks as well as national organizations are being formed, using combinations of legal and extra-legal methods to protect their homes and get housing inequality issues on the political agenda (Polanska & Richard, 2018). This development should be regarded in the wake of a long tradition of tenants organizing *within* the Swedish Union of Tenants (www.hyresgastforeningen.se). With more than half a million members, this is the largest civil society organization in the country. Founded in 1923 as a radical movement reacting to housing shortage and tenure insecurity, members at the time engaged in rent strikes, blockades and tenant militancy (Rolf, 2016). During the following decades the organization became an important systemic actor with the responsibility of representing tenants’ interests in courts and negotiations. Today, the Swedish Union of Tenants negotiates rent levels with both public and private actors. This legalistic approach blocks the organization’s ability to act powerfully upon deregulation and increasing housing inequality, if landlords and developers raise rents within the existing legal framework. Alas, the past three decades of neoliberal policy have left loopholes and ways of circumventing residual legislation, weakening tenant protections. Consequently, tenants in Sweden have established new and radical platforms and methods; currently, a revitalized engagement for tenant rights and social justice is raised in various ways, on a local as well as a national scale.

By turning to three different cities in Sweden - Stockholm, Malmö and Uppsala - the following sections scrutinize how tenants organize in response to the rise of privatization, gentrification and renoviction. These examples show the varied effects of deregulation of rental housing and how tenants are responding to these processes.

1. Protesting the revitalized privatization trend in Stockholm

In 2018, Stockholm’s newly appointed Finance Commissioner, Anna König Järlemyr commented in a news article: ‘I will tackle the housing shortage from an equality perspective. Women cannot afford divorces in Stockholm today, and are forced to stay in bad marriages, and when that happens, then it is no longer a question about housing shortage, but a serious problem of equality’ (Dagens Nyheter, 2018). This was her first public statement after being appointed to Stockholm City Hall in October 2018 when the centre-right coalition, together with the Green Party, won Stockholm municipality. The commissioner’s proposal was maybe incongruous but should come as no surprise in light of the rapid privatization of public

housing stock though tenure conversions into home-ownership. In the same article, the new Property Commissioner, Dennis Wedin, stated that he considers Margaret Thatcher a role model and that his most urgent task is to privatize public housing through individual homeownership in the suburbs. With the laconic statement “we can’t believe we have to protest against this crap again” the urban social movements started to mobilize. They had a confidence developed from the previous decade’s experiences of anti-privatization struggles and relationships which would be useful to confront these recent developments.

When a centre-right coalition previously governed Stockholm City Hall (2007-2014), it had promoted privatization by pressuring public housing companies to offer tenants the opportunity to buy their apartments. During this period, 26.000 apartments were privatized through homeownership (SVD, 2015). The process was backed by an expensive public relations campaign launched by the city and consultants who were sent to the suburbs to convince people to become homeowners, with the consultants earning a commission on each sale. The main arguments for privatization were that public management was ineffective, that privatization would combat segregation, and that it should be possible for individuals to benefit financially through owning property. An ongoing battle between home as a right and housing as commodity played out, and people that had been neighbours for years suddenly became enemies (Werne, 2011). In retrospect, it is also possible to see how these tenure conversions created a more marketized housing provision, with speculation and financialization as driving forces. Research has pointed out that this reform led to the gentrification of many areas of Stockholm, resulting in a more economically polarized city (Andersson and Magnusson Turner, 2014). It also led to new forms of resistance.

A myriad of local anti-privatization groups formed during the two decades of conversions and public housing sales. Around 2010, these groups started to merge to form larger networks along the city’s subway lines. The idea was to not only react to devastating processes but to share knowledge and become a proactive force. In line with this, these networks struggled against privatizations, but also created stronger relationships between neighbors through parties, cafes, demonstrations, micro commons and art projects. When the left-leaning coalition got into power in Stockholm in 2014, the right-to-buy program was cancelled immediately but reinstated following the election in 2018.

Now, with the right-to-buy program once again launched in Stockholm, new resistance is emerging. Tired but angry neighbors from the old subway-line networks are reactivating under new banners and names. By the beginning of 2019, at least six groups have been formed, as well as an overarching city-wide network, *Rädda Hyresrätterna* (Save the Tenancies), organizing hundreds if not more than a thousand people. Chances are that the right-to-buy program will be a failure, as polls have shown that the absolute majority of Stockholmers are opposed to these privatizations (Hyresgästföreningen, 2019). Furthermore, this time around a weaker economic forecast is making profits harder to realize. Whether the groups once again will partake in other conflict areas in the neoliberal Stockholm of today, such as renovictions, developer-led urbanism, anti-fascism, or police harassment, is left to be seen. What we do know is that the City Hall majority in Stockholm is facing tired but also angry

and experienced tenants. It is thanks to their resistance, and not the right-to-buy program sought by Property Commissioner Wedin, that a more equal city remains possible.

2. Connecting social struggles in the city - reflections from Malmö

The area of Möllevången in Malmö, Sweden's third biggest city, has historically combined forms of resistance against precarious conditions in the labor and housing sectors. For instance, in 1926 around 15.000 people filled the streets of Möllevången following the death of a striking worker, killed by a strike-breaker (Nyzell, 2009). This working-class neighborhood has since then transitioned into a popular urban district, offering relatively affordable housing options and a diverse cultural scene. The change of Möllevången is closely reflected in ongoing conflicts around housing and public space. A recent mobilization of tenants against a newly established private rental housing company in the area exemplifies shifts within the political economy of rental housing in Sweden, and how resistance towards such transformations unfolds.

Smaller private landlords have historically dominated the housing landscape of Möllevången and tenants' initiatives have fought for better maintenance and living conditions. For example, from the mid-1990s into the 2000s a group of tenants organized around housing issues, creating a meeting place for tenants and improving courtyards (Martinez, 2011). Today, private landlords own around 68 percent of the homes in Möllevången (OSDB & MONA, 2018) while the overall private rental sector in Malmö is a little more than one fourth of the total stock (Statistics Sweden 2018).

The Norwegian based private housing investor Heimstaden strategically buys poorly maintained property from smaller landlords in Malmö, to renovate and 'upgrade' the rental housing stock. When a tenant moves out, Heimstaden renovates, increasing the value of the apartment and setting a higher rent before they lease the apartment to a new tenant. In contrast to other renovation projects, this strategy circumvents risks of mobilization of tenants since the apartment is empty. In the wake of mobilization among tenants against renovations, this strategy has become more and more common. The other side of this strategy is to keep maintenance as low as possible so to increase the profit margin when someone moves out. This has caused anger and concern among tenants and thus it has become a focus for mobilizations around housing issues in Möllevången.

To fight this strategy, a survey was undertaken by activists to find out more about people living, working or spending time in the neighborhood, creating a knowledge base for further actions and social mobilizations. Tenants also used social media to share information about their living situations and to discuss problems in their homes. The idea was to share knowledge and resources about how to get help with immediate needs, such as maintenance, and to create a common feeling about shared experiences, breaking the isolation you can experience as tenant (see for example Mauritz 2016, about the increase of mental illness due to renovations). A step towards breaking experienced isolation was to open a meeting place, to organize lectures around housing issues and to create a space for common action, such as an 'issue-reports-drop in'.

Figure 2

The memorial to Malmö's affordable rents.
Source: Allt åt alla, Malmö



It became apparent that it was difficult to mobilize and gather people at this meeting place and the focus was instead set on political action. The award for the ‘worst maintained’ apartment and a symbolical ‘memorial’ to mourn the death of Malmö’s affordable rents (Figure 2) performed a critique towards Heimstaden’s bad maintenance and rising rents. Consequently, Heimstaden’s investments in the area enhanced housing conflicts and worked as a steppingstone for organizing around housing issues. This work recognized the need to link such struggles with other urban conflicts regarding gentrification, such as safety.

The mobilization in Möllevången, and in Malmö more broadly, attempted to work with housing and urban issues by linking issues of impoverishment, isolation and safety, including not only tenants’ perspectives but also the perspectives of someone working in or visiting the neighborhood. Knowledge-sharing activities, opening a meeting place, and political actions became the starting point for a long-term mobilization around increased marketization and policing of housing and urban space in Möllevången. As such, this example shows how mobilization and actions emerge from a grassroots’ organization which *creates the path by walking it*.

3. Local struggles on renovation and green space in Uppsala

Under the common banner ‘Save Eriksberg – together we make it possible’, local groups have united twice in joint action at a local square to question plans of infill and redevelopment in Eriksberg, a neighborhood in Uppsala. These protests involved several hundred citizens, raising a wide range of issues in an effort to resist what was regarded as top-down and non-sustainable municipal redevelopment plans (see for example the work of the group organizing to preserve the area “Bevara Täljstenen” (at www.bevarataljstenen.se)).

Rather than reflecting a nimby mentality, which is how critics tend to interpret local resistance, these actions have put forward complex and important questions of injustice and long-term social, economic and environmental issues. Public attention has been drawn by one local network to the biological diversity and leisure quality that green spaces bring to the area, whereas others have raised awareness regarding renoviction, the right to stay put, segregation, health and environmental care.

During the same period, in a neighborhood on the other side of Uppsala, a small group of tenants performed a low-key but persistent struggle opposing the housing company's plan to convert 290 rental dwellings into co-operative ownership. Through numerous information meetings, leaflet handouts and door-to-door campaigns, three women managed to stop the conversions, and the plan was cancelled in early 2018. The local tenant union in the same neighborhood is currently organizing to protect small scale green space areas in reaction to the housing company's systematic removal of playgrounds, bus stops and trees in a project named 'Nollställning Gränby' or 'Ground Zero Gränby' (Sveriges Radio, 2019).

These examples appear to differ in scope and performance but have important links to each other as well as to earlier local housing struggles in Uppsala. Large-scale renoviction processes have sharply increased the general living costs for tenants in the city. In some neighborhoods, extensive mobilization by local tenants has achieved slightly more sustainable renovation processes. These small victories are important as they make a difference locally, promote solidarity between neighbors and build collective knowledge of methods useful in changing power structures in renoviction neighborhoods.

In Uppsala, a city located close to the expanding Stockholm region, municipal representatives have developed an almost schizophrenic stance in the media vis-a-vis the rapidly changing housing situation. Increased housing inequality is met by claims of easy access to housing, 'contrary to what people believe, it is fairly easy to get hold of a place to live in Uppsala' (Uppsala Nya Tidning, 2017), combined with declarations about the urgency to renovate, construct and densify (Sveriges Television, 2019). The upper segment of the market has become saturated, with developers recently abandoning several projects in the city center, leaving empty houses and lots behind (Bostadsbrist i Uppsala, 2019). Despite statements and plans for making Uppsala sustainable, the housing sector is definitely headed in another direction!

Since renoviction first hit Uppsala in 2008, alongside some large-scale protests, there has been a low-key exchange of support, solidarity acts and experiences between neighborhoods. Residents of Eriksberg were early to join mobilizations across town and formed local groups and networks. These in turn arranged workshops locally and across the city, discussing tenant experiences of renoviction. At informal meetings, the exchange of experiences and support have been vital for maintaining low-key resistance and building long-term solidarity across the city. By highlighting the contemporary situation in Uppsala, we wish to shed light on the importance of local small-scale cooperation and persistence to resist unfair, top-down re-development and capital investments. Long term solidarity among tenants' form sites where complex issues of social and environmental justice are continually raised and voiced in different ways, and make an important difference in practice, locally.

4. Conclusions

The unfolding of housing deregulation on Stockholm, Malmö and Uppsala and concomitant tenants' mobilizations illustrate the variety of housing conflicts and struggles in contemporary Sweden. Importantly, the above examples of local struggles move beyond the traditional role of the Swedish Union of Tenants' which is bound by a legislative framework focused primarily on rent negotiations, legal support and public outreach. Although these aspects remain important, the contemporary examples discussed in this article show the urgent need for broader and extra-legal actions as housing deregulation unfolds.

Common to the struggles in the three cities are their local embeddedness and their commitment to long-term mobilizations. Together, they show a variety of tactics, including art projects, media campaigns, creation of meeting places, knowledge sharing and direct actions. Current processes of privatization, displacement and renoventions reveal processes of deregulation, which provoke articulations of resistance and struggles for housing justice. Steps have also been taken to connect these struggles. The national tenants' organisation *Alla ska kunna bo kvar* (allaskakunnabokvar.se) and the annual forum Bostadsvrålet (bostadsvralet.se) are working to strengthen local struggles through the exchange of experiences and knowledge across the country.

In conclusion, the historical institutionalization of housing conflicts in the form of the Swedish Union of Tenants can be understood as a process through which housing issues became separated from other conflicts, such as labor issues. In today's increased housing precariousness, we need to connect such struggles but also to center them within wider socio-political and economic struggles for justice and the right to the city. Thus, affordable housing and the right to stay put become, in today's neoliberalized and financialized urban and housing landscape, two key radical demands.

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