

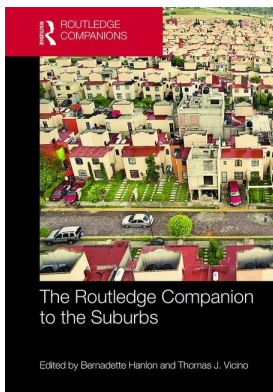
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# Social exclusion and multiethnic suburbs in Sweden

*Magnus Dahlstedt and David Ekholm*

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It will be divided at all times, wherever you go, wherever you are, it is divided. So, I don't want to sound negative, but it feels like there will always be divisions. I don't know reason why these divisions exist, there is something mysterious about them.

*Siana*

## Introduction

In recent years, tensions and conflicts in the suburban Swedish landscape have attracted increased attention. Media reports on youth uprisings, burning cars, and stones thrown at police and rescue vehicles have put the focus on urban peripheries, particularly on suburban youth as the subject of social disorder and disintegration (Stigendal, 2016). Consequently, the urban peripheries and suburban youth are formed as a subject of social change and social policy interventions.

These reports conflict with previous images of Sweden and Swedish welfare policy as successful in terms of its universal outreach and arrangements aiming for equality, diversity, and social inclusion (Schierup and Ålund, 2011). In Sweden, as well as internationally, the problems of marginalization have given rise to intense debates about the challenges or possible decline of multiculturalism and the need for strategies promoting integration and social solidarity (Dahlstedt and Neergaard, 2016). These conflicts are played out in relation to fundamental transformations of Swedish welfare state policy, where welfarist governing from the social point of view has gradually been more and more influenced by advanced liberal governing (Schierup et al., 2006; Larsson et al., 2012). Since the 1990s, Swedish social policy has been characterized by a shift from equality to freedom of choice, from redistribution to activation, from collective rights to individual responsibilities (Dahlstedt, 2009).

These shifts have had a range of consequences such as increasing social and economic divisions and intensifying polarization in Swedish cities (Schierup et al., 2014). Once more, public attention has been drawn to suburban areas previously known as part of the Million-program, a large-scale housing project initiated in late 1960s as part of broader universal and state-centered welfare policies, providing rental apartments for the broad population (Molina, 1997). From the start, these urban areas of rental departments have been portrayed in terms of deviance and as sites of risk and social problems, tensions and conflicts – in the 1970s with a focus on class, in the 1980s and 1990s with a focus on ethno-cultural difference and otherness (Ristilammi, 1993). In the new millennium,

these suburban areas and their residents were primarily characterized in terms of exclusion – as excluded and outside the rest of society, “areas of exclusion” (*utanförskapsområden*) and consequently, in political terms, “the problem of the outside” (*utanförskapsproblemet*) (Davidsson, 2010; Dahlstedt, 2015). In the following chapter, we examine the “mysterious” drawing of boundaries and divisions by using the above expression by Siana. These boundaries are approached as expressions of social exclusion, particularly relevant for forming the lives of youth in multi-ethnic suburbs in Sweden.

In this chapter, we problematize the current discourses of social exclusion and segregation in suburban Sweden by providing an overview of contemporary Swedish research, further illustrated by ongoing research of the social exclusion of youth in the suburban landscape. First, we outline the conceptual debate on social exclusion in suburban Sweden and, in relation to this, we outline a theoretical approach to social exclusion based on social rights and substantial citizenship. Second, we use these concepts to approach four dynamics of social exclusion and their effects in the urban peripheries of Sweden today: spatial exclusion, poverty, education, and political participation. Third, on the basis of this overview of Swedish research, we elaborate on interventions aimed at social inclusion and social change emerging in recent Swedish social policy. Fourth, we discuss current discourses on suburban social exclusion, and provide alternative frames of interpretation of the dynamics and effects of urban polarization.

## Perspectives on social exclusion

The concept of exclusion has been part of Swedish political discourse ever since the 1990s, but it was normalized in the beginning of the new millennium, particularly in the 2006 election, where the center-right Alliance for Sweden succeeded in defining the main political challenge in Sweden as a choice between work or exclusion, activation or passive welfare benefits (Davidsson, 2010). Along this discourse, the distressed suburban areas have been portrayed as a problem, “areas of exclusion,” characterized by a particular mentality of welfare dependency, alienation, distrust, and political passivity. Although a high level of unemployment is seen as an urgent problem in these suburban “areas of exclusion,” once it has taken shape the specific morality that these socioeconomic conditions generate is seen as having a dynamic of its own (Dahlstedt, 2015). Thus, the “culture of exclusion” is separated from the wider political, social, and material context. In sum, the suburban residents are themselves made responsible for their own exclusion (cf. Schierup et al., 2014). Moreover, such conceptualization of the suburban areas as containers of problems of exclusion makes possible certain social interventions specifically targeting the areas and their residents (Ekholm, 2016).

This discourse on social exclusion, on boundaries between the inside and the outside, constitutes a means of governing, whereby social change is geographically located at the areas of the outside. Interventions are promoted, focusing not least on social pedagogic means providing and facilitating social inclusion, guiding individuals and groups from the outside into the inside (cf. Dahlstedt and Ekholm, 2017). In this discourse, exclusion is approached as *static conditions* in need of intervention, rather than in terms of *social processes* and *dynamics*. In order to observe and understand social exclusion, we focus on citizenship in terms of formal as well as substantial rights (civil, political, and most notably social rights), forming opportunities for youth as well as other residents to participate in the societal community as equals (cf. Schierup et al., 2006). Central to forming both opportunities and limitations for participation and inclusion are symbolic representations of reality, of individuals and groups as well as geographic areas, not least the multi-ethnic suburbs of Sweden (Sernhede, 2011). By approaching the situation in suburban “areas of exclusion” in relation to citizenship and social participation, four main dynamics can be identified in contemporary Swedish research, forming the conditions referred to in terms of “social exclusion,” boundaries between the inside and the outside. In the following, we will outline some of the main lines in research, with a focus on spatial exclusion, poverty, education, and political participation.

## The dynamics of social exclusion

In the last few decades, economic inequalities have increased in Sweden, creating geographic divisions in the urban landscapes. On the outskirts of larger and mid-sized cities in Sweden, there is a steady relative increase of socially vulnerable residents. These patterns of segregation have to a high degree become synonymous with ethnic segregation, as the concentration of migrants and residents with foreign backgrounds in these suburban areas are comparably high (NBHW, 2010).

### *Spatial exclusion: the formation of the suburb*

The Swedish urban and suburban geography is today characterized by economic, social, and ethno-cultural segregation (Stigendal, 2016). The relative decrease in public housing and rental apartments in cities in general, and the concomitant concentration of subsidized public housing in urban outskirts, have provided a notable precondition for spatial segregation. Families and residents with foreign backgrounds and residents with poor financial situations have limited opportunities to obtain other forms of housing; consequently, the concentration of these residents and families in public housing of the Million-program is steadily increasing (Andersson, 2008). This situation creates general divisions between the native Swedish population and people of foreign backgrounds. This, in turn, gives rise to difficulties promoting integration and socialization and, furthermore, difficulties for people of foreign backgrounds in gaining access to arenas where they may meet and socialize with native Swedes (Mukhtar-Landgren, 2012).

A driving force behind the ethno-cultural spatial segregation is “Swedish avoidance,” rather than “Swedish flight.” Low levels of in-migration of native Swedes, and higher levels of in-migration of migrants and people of foreign background into distressed suburban areas, explain long-term ethno-cultural segregation (Bråmås, 2006). In relation, it is becoming a relatively rare experience among native Swedes to live in areas characterized by “Swedish avoidance,” which furthermore provides a breeding ground for mythologies about otherness and deviant life in distressed suburbia (Andersson, 2008).

There is strong covariance between the ethno-cultural and the socioeconomic composition of geographical areas in Swedish cities. Whereas areas dominated by homogenous native Swedish residents have generally good financial resources, multi-ethnic areas are generally financially weak. Most notably, the residents in multi-ethnic suburbs suffer from a diversity of social problems, such as unemployment, poor health, and a lack of participation in formal political institutions (NBHW, 2010).

Moreover, various representations of the “suburb” are produced in media and political discourse, shaping dramatic images of the suburb as a place of otherness and deviancy (Ristilammi, 1993; Dahlstedt, 2005) characterized by chaos, tensions and conflicts, risks and problems (Ekholm, 2016). Residents themselves seldom articulated the dominant representations of the suburbs, as they lack the privilege to articulate and present life in the suburbs in their own words. Here, not least mass media has the privilege of articulating the “suburbs” as a site of otherness, differentiated from the rest of Swedish society, creating boundaries between the normal and Swedish inside, and the deviant and the excluded outside (Dahlstedt, 2005). Such discourse enables the location of conflicts and problems to the outside, the urban peripheries of the multi-ethnic suburb (Tedros, 2008). As illustrated in an interview with Dimen, a young male living in a multi-ethnic suburb in Sweden, these discourses may have a range of consequences for those portrayed as living in the excluded outside, not least in terms of feelings of alienation and a sense of unfair treatment by dominant Swedish society.

So, when I watch TV, the media describe the Area as a ghetto . . . it's really horrible . . . they take pictures and film the shabbiest place. There are shabby places all over the country.

If they come and really look at the Area, in the schools, fields, everywhere, they will not see gangs destroying. That's not how it is so. There are gangs everywhere. I cannot deny that gangs does not exist in the Area, because they do. But I think the Area is a wonderful place, like many other places in the city and in Sweden.

In relation to media reports and dominant political discourse, suburban youth are learning to conceive of society as consisting of an “inside” and an “outside,” inhabited by “them” and “us,” where they may also come to view themselves as other, deviant and the subject of exclusion (Sernhede, 2011). Such mass media and political discourses of the suburb may – as in the preceding excerpt – not at all be legitimate by the suburban youth. At the same time, youth need to relate to and develop strategies in order to deal with them, in terms of identification or dis-identification, acceptance or resistance (Andersson, 2003; León Rosales, 2010). In the process of spatial segregation, the discursive and the material intertwine, producing boundaries between inside and outside society, manifested in the form of cultural expressions, identifications, and experiences as well as socioeconomic materiality.

### *Poverty and exclusion*

Economic vulnerability is linked to a range of welfare problems such as unemployment and school failure, which in turn result in health problems and premature death. The risk of suffering from a plurality of welfare problems and vulnerabilities rose after the financial crisis in 2008, particularly among residents in distressed suburbs (NBHW, 2010). Moreover, increasing differences in income and economic resources lead to reduced social mobility, particularly for those with the highest incomes and the strongest resources – they do not generally risk downward social mobility and their position remains quite stable over generations. Growing up in homes lacking economic resources increases the risk of being poor as an adult and lower opportunities to become a high-income earner substantially. Social positions are transferred from parents to children in families, and exposure to social problems and risk of social exclusion, as well as opportunities of social inclusion, are dependent upon the parents' social position as well as the residential area (Bäckman and Nilsson, 2011; NBHW, 2010). When inequalities are persistent, poverty and vulnerability are reproduced and often spatially located to the suburban geography, segregation, and imagined boundaries between the included and the excluded are consolidated and difficult to transcend (Fritzell, 2011).

Furthermore, spatial segregation leads to unequal opportunities in the labor market. For instance, youth with foreign backgrounds are particularly vulnerable to unemployment and more often perform jobs with low education requirements (Schierup et al., 2015). Here, the risk is not only unemployment but also temporary and part-time work, which may not provide sufficient income or qualify one for social insurance (Mörtvik, 2014). Along with stricter policies on state-administered social insurance qualifications (and levels of insurance), the need for municipal means-tested social support has increased, further localizing public responsibility for and individualizing economic security. Long-term means-tested social support creates a perceived lack of personal integrity and autonomy, as well as exclusion from prevalent consumption, social relations, and networks. Moreover, relations to public authorities tend to become stigmatized. In all, this creates a “double powerlessness,” accumulating and reinforcing social and welfare problems and limiting the ability to manage them (Angelin, 2009). These socioeconomic conditions are crucial among youth for self-confidence and hopes for the future. Youth in socio-economically distressed suburbs tend to be less optimistic about the future than youth in other areas. Consequently, negative attitudes about the future reinforce future social exclusion (Alm, 2014). Mara, a

young woman living in one multi-ethnic suburb in Sweden, reflects upon the future and her life trajectory, considering her status as a working-class woman of foreign background.

I'm a woman from Thailand and I don't have a Swedish surname. Few people can pronounce my last name and nobody knows how to spell it [laughter]. I'm also working class. Sure, some people are fighting for equality, that immigrants should have the same opportunities and some are struggling for the working class, but I am at the bottom in all three categories. . . . I'm a little afraid of the future. If there are a thousand job applicants and I am one of them, how far will I get? It's a little dark, but I hope it will get better. If you live with that dream, there is still a chance.

Here, Mara illustrates how contemporary life conditions form her situation not only today but also in the future, as her plans are perceived as restricted by the fact she is a young, working-class woman "from Thailand." At the same time, for Mara, as well as for other youth living in suburban areas, there are hopes and dreams for the future. Education is one of the main interventions made in Sweden's welfarist social policy to promote social mobility, compensating for social inequalities and for realizing individual hopes and dreams for the future.

### *Education and exclusion*

There are strong connections between youth's socioeconomic backgrounds and their educational progress, where youth from vulnerable families are generally more likely to receive weak or incomplete grades and drop out of school, and less likely to continue studying at university (Social report, 2010). As these factors are geographically distributed, the urban patterns of socioeconomic segregation constitute a basis for educational inequalities, further reinforced by a range of neoliberal policy measures, not least of which are the free school choice reforms and the establishment of private schools introduced in the early 1990s (Dahlstedt and Trumberg, 2017). With this reform pupils are allowed to choose their school in a system where private schools are publically funded through a voucher system. Consequently, schools compete for pupils and their education voucher, forming a "winner-schools in the inner-city and loser-schools in the suburbs" dynamic (Bunar and Kallstenius, 2008, p. 11). Here, integration is possible for pupils with high social and cultural capital. At the same time, such individual mobility and integration through active school choices consolidates the composition of pupils in suburban schools (Ambrose, 2017). Suburban pupils and their parents acknowledge the poor learning conditions in their residential schools, which are characterized by an absence of students who speak Swedish as a first language; by changing schools there is hope for better opportunities and access to "the Swedish culture" (Bunar, 2009). In the process of choosing schools, the dynamics of choice are underpinned and guided by different schools' reputations. In a focus group with suburban primary school pupils, the following dialog played out, illustrating the importance of reputation.

*Pupil 6:* Well, I think it's important that the school has a good status. Because if it has a bad status, then maybe they think you cannot . . . [. . .] But it is not *really* that important, because it's the school, in fact. So, it's how *you* think about it that matters, more than what status it has. But it is still important.

*Pupil 10:* If you for example attend the Southern school, then you know, well, you're not good.

*Pupil 7:* Yeah, it pops up, like automatically. One really shouldn't think like that, but you do.

It is obvious the way a school is perceived by society defines its ability to be competitive.

In line with policy changes focusing on pupils and parents' active choices and responsibilities, there is an increasing emphasis on the need to be active in choosing a school and provide a supportive home environment for learning. Thus, unequal home conditions form yet another basis for reinforced inequalities in terms of school performance (Dahlstedt, 2009). Current conditions of urban segregation in Swedish cities, together with the freedom of choice reform, contribute to unequal educational opportunities (Sernhede, 2011). This diminishes schools' traditional welfarist role, where education is seen as a "public good," and schools constitute meeting places and arenas compensating for unequal opportunities and overcoming social divisions (Trumberg, 2011). The role of education, in turn, has a range of implications for the participation of society in general.

### *Exclusion from political participation*

Residents in distressed suburbs are considerably underrepresented in municipal and regional councils as well as in the national parliament. There are certain informal rules and conventions that make it difficult for people with foreign backgrounds to participate on equal terms in political parties. To obtain a political position, it seems crucial to be familiar with "Swedish meeting culture" and informal social norms, and have established social networks. The lack of representation means there are unequal opportunities for the residents to *speak for* themselves in political debate as well as *speak about* life in the distressed suburbia (Dahlstedt, 2005, 2015).

When it comes to youth in multicultural suburbs, they are portrayed in political discourse as either passive, due to their lack of participation in political and civil society, and inability to make active choices, or as misguided through trouble-making activity (Ekholm, 2017a, 2017b; Kings, 2011).

When democratic institutions, as a result of segregation, seem unavailable to a certain group of people and democracy seems reserved for those with resources, it may create reserved attitudes towards democratic institutions among those experiencing social exclusion (Dahlstedt, 2005).

Besides formal political practices and parliamentary participation, civil society operates as an arena for civil and political participation in multi-ethnic suburbs, involving not least youth (Kings, 2011). Consequently, reserved attitudes towards formal politics, the lack of opportunities for democratic participation, and an inability to make their voices heard among suburban youth, create a space for the development of new social movements. Social disorder, in terms of throwing stones against police and rescue services, has been interpreted as an illustration of reserved attitudes towards a reserved Swedish society (Stigendal, 2016). In response to recent uprisings among youth, suburban organizations such as The Megaphone and The Panthers have had an important role in speaking for and claiming the rights of suburban youth (Schierup et al., 2014; Ålund and León Rosales, 2017). Among these organizations, Suburbs Against Violence has organized a number of demonstrations proposing alternative ways of representing life in suburbia:

Here in our suburbs, people live in cages, with poor life chances. And things are getting worse and worse, from a social point of view. Is it strange that people here are turning inwards and even killing each other? The violence is just a symptom and we are here to protest against the causes and construct our own resistance to these causes, regardless of what politicians and officials have to say.

*(Kitimbwa Sabuni)*

Leisure time activities such as culture, music, and sports provide forms of political and civil participation where youth have the opportunity to speak for themselves. For instance, hip-hop has been emphasized as a crucial means of cultural expression, giving voice to experiences of

suburban life among the youth (Sernhede, 2011). Sports practices may also provide opportunities where youth may experience community and develop their dreams of progress and success (León Rosales, 2010).

## On the promotion of social inclusion

Notably, these are some main features of social exclusion in suburban Sweden as presented in contemporary research and experienced and dealt with by some of the youth exposed to social exclusion. So, how do governing agencies respond to these forms of social exclusion in multi-ethnic suburbs and how can social inclusion and social change be promoted in Sweden today? Based on current research on youth in suburban Sweden, we will briefly illustrate three isolated yet significant interventions to counter the social exclusion of youth in these areas. For the interventions illustrated, and for a range of other interventions in Swedish social policy today, there is an emphasis on reaching out to residents of the “areas of exclusion,” its youth, their families, and their communities, based on a desire to include them in Swedish society.

In the last decade, sports have been promoted as a means of social change, promoting social inclusion and as an alternative to delinquent behaviors. Accordingly, sport-based interventions are a common feature in Sweden today, performed as a collaboration between public and private actors. Sports, in particular, are tied to specific spatial locations. It is performed at a specific ground or venue, and it has a limited and residential outreach. Sport-based interventions imbue a certain pedagogic rationality, with a certain focus on empowerment and activation, learning to take responsibility and make the “right” decisions in life, promoting discipline and encouraging assimilation into Swedish norms and behaviors. Centerpieces of sport-based interventions are local community role models, embodying the will, conduct, and actions promoted, enacting activation, discipline, and transformation into Swedish-ness in their very appearance (cf. Ekholm, 2017a, 2017b; Dahlstedt and Ekholm, 2017).

Other interventions work on youth by targeting the families living in “areas of exclusion.” One particular intervention studied is Home-get-togethers, initiated to establish meeting places where migrant mothers can meet representatives from the police, emergency services, and the municipality in the relaxed and familiar environment of the mothers’ own homes. In this setting, the intervention aims to develop trusting relationships between the mothers and the local actors, relationships that are personal and effective, rather than juridical, thus blurring the boundaries between private and public, professional relationships and friendship. By such interventions, the families are made reachable targets for various learning activities, where there is a possibility to promote change among the mothers and their children (cf. Dahlstedt and Lozic, 2017).

In “areas of exclusion,” schools are another site where a wide range of interventions are initiated, commonly based on cooperation between local actors such as the police, social workers, and civil society organizations. Among these school-based interventions, there is a strong focus on education for security. Through collaboration between various actors, a range of activities throughout Sweden aims to change the students’ norms – and those of the teachers and eventually the parents – as a means of preventing crime and contributing to security in school, the local community and society at large. Through a wide range of pedagogic techniques, with a focus on reflection, activation, and responsibility, students are invited to challenge their past and develop new norms (cf. Dahlstedt and Hertzberg, 2011; Dahlstedt and Foultier, 2017).

Although these three examples are separate interventions and do not constitute the full range played out in Sweden’s current suburban context, they are illustrative of a broader tendency in Swedish social policy, which could be approached and understood in terms of the following recurring features: first, the interventions target the local domains where youth are reachable



– their leisure activities, their families and private homes, and their local schools. Here, the domain of the “suburb” is constructed by means of the interventions promoted. Accordingly, the “suburb” is not a predetermined geographic area where interventions are played out, but first and foremost a discursive formation made possible by these interventions, and – in turn – making certain interventions possible. Second, by certain interventions in these domains, and in collaboration with a range of actors, it’s possible to aim pedagogic interventions at shaping the subjectivities and behaviors of the youth. Third, these interventions, in turn, make wider social change possible. The skills and competencies attained are supposed to be transferred into other spheres of suburban life; thus, youth are themselves made agents of social change. Accordingly, youth themselves attain competencies for inclusion, which are distributed by means of social relations, in turn, creating social inclusion in the wider societal community.

Conclusively, while multi-ethnic suburbs are exposed to a range of processes of social exclusion, these and a multitude of social policy interventions contribute to separating them from the rest of society. In line with such rationality, the cause of exclusion is located at the delimited “area of exclusion”; simultaneously, it is formed as the area for potential solutions to this problem. Here, social problems as well as potential solutions are located at the particular urban periphery and moreover attributed to its youth and residents.

## Conclusion

The exposition in this chapter raises some concerns about the dominant ways contemporary Swedish welfare policy conceptualizes and responds to problems of social exclusion more widely.

In line with the transformations of social policy in recent decades, more and more responsibility for managing risk, social problems, and social exclusion has been placed on individuals, their families, and their communities. This is illustrated in current discourses on multi-ethnic suburbs in Sweden as sites of social problems as well as social change. In these discourses, the focus is put on exclusion in terms of static *conditions* located to the excluded “outside,” while the *processes* causing social inequality (manifested in terms of the above-described four dynamics of social exclusion) are left out of the limelight and not addressed in locally based social policy interventions. Locating the problems of inequality and segregation to the outside, to the suburban “areas of exclusion,” may solve a political problem – that of the “problem of the outside” (*utanförskapsproblemet*) – however, without seriously addressing the social processes and problems caused by the dynamics of exclusion (expounded on previously).

Certainly, Sweden has an obvious problem with social exclusion that is displayed and acted out particularly in the suburban landscapes. However, this situation needs not to be addressed by locating problems to the residents or geographies excluded and separated from society. Rather, this situation needs to be addressed as the consequences of structural processes creating inequality and segregation and, thus, as concerns for society as a whole. Here, there is a need to approach social change from the social point of view. If there are political wills to promote integration and overcome boundaries between the included and the excluded, processes of segregation and exclusion forming these boundaries need to be addressed, not only the subjectivities and geographies of the excluded being redressed.

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