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SPATIAL INEQUALITIES: TOWN CENTRE DEVELOPMENT AND URBAN PERIPHERIES

JULIA FREDRIKSSON

Abstract

In light of the increased interest in city centre development in Nordic planning, this paper examines city centre development from a perspective on space that takes power relations into account. I aim to analyse how the city centre is discursively constructed in contemporary Swedish urban planning and design, and to enhance the understanding of what this means in respect to how spatial power relations in cities are created and consolidated, focusing on how the city centre's role and identity can be understood in relation to the role and meaning of the urban periphery. My study is based on a Swedish example, and on a relational perspective on space (Massey), postcolonial theory, the concept of constitutive outside (Mouffe), and the concept of bio-politics (Foucault).

The study demonstrates that the form of town centre development presented here can be regarded as a planning strategy that brings about spatial inequality by creating and consolidating differences and hierarchies between centres and peripheries. This occurs when the city centre is constructed as a bearer of post-industrial values and depicted as a generic place which can represent universal ideals, while the periphery is constructed as an exception which is located as a societal and spatial "outside".

Keywords:
urban planning and design, city
centre, town centre develop-
ment, power, relational space,
bio-politics, identity

This paper examines Swedish city centre development on the basis of a power perspective on urban space. This is studied against the background of the increased interest in city centres both within planning practice and in the broader discourse on cities, where city centres have been depicted in many ways as the urban ideal. Many Nordic cities are investing heavily in refurbishing the city centre, mainly with a focus on the city centre as a place for shopping, entertainment, and events. In Sweden, town centre development plays an important role in planning practice, several Norwegian town centres have undergone extensive transformation processes, and in Denmark, the refurbishment of Copenhagen and Aarhus town centres has received significant attention both within and outside the Nordic countries. Similar tendencies can also be seen in many other European countries, for example, the refurbishment of central Barcelona, which is one of the more well-known European examples, and the British model of “Town Centre Management” is often stressed as a role model for town centre development.

At the same time, there is research highlighting that the urban peripheries, mainly represented in Sweden by the Million Programme suburbs¹, are stigmatised and marginalised in the discussion of the contemporary and future city. How can increased interest in the city centre, and city centre development, be understood and how can it be comprehended in relation to the general role that the suburb has taken within the Swedish discourse on cities?

In a study of a Swedish example, working with a framework of discourse theory, a relational perspective on space, and postcolonial theory, and through the concepts of “constitutive outside” and “bio-politics”, this paper will discuss city centre development in relation to the ambition within municipal planning to be a part of the post-industrial society. The aim is to analyse how the city centre is discursively constructed in contemporary Swedish urban planning and design, and to enhance the understanding of what this means in respect to how spatial power relations in cities are created and consolidated. In particular, my focus is on what these tendencies within planning practice mean for how differences and hierarchies in the city are established and maintained, and how the role and identity of the city centre within contemporary planning practice can be understood in relation to the role and meaning of the urban periphery. However, the focus of the study has not been on the exclusion of specific Million Programme suburbs, but instead, this empirical case is seen as exemplary of how the spatial identity of the city centre is constructed in contrast to how the spatial identity of the Swedish Million Programme suburb is generally constructed within contemporary Swedish discourse. Thus, focus is not on a specific exclusion process concerning a specific physical place, but rather on the search for structural societal aspects in this case, highlighting how the construction of spatial identities can be understood from a power perspective, in relation to a constitutive outside.

- 1 The Million Programme (Swedish: Miljonprogrammet) was a Swedish housing building program (1965–1974), aiming to build one million dwellings within ten years.

The empirical study is based on material that relates to the transformation of the city centre of the Swedish city of Jönköping.² Jönköping has been selected as an example as it provides interesting material in relation to the theme and purpose of the study. In Jönköping, the municipality has initiated an extensive, long-term and ambitious refurbishment project that has been ongoing since the 1990s, including, for example, refurbishment of public spaces, new traffic solutions, development of new connections between the city centre and lake Munksjön, and development of the city centre as a site for events, becoming in this way a role model for town centre development in many other Swedish municipalities. Jönköping is also home to one of Sweden's first town centre organisations, structured around a partnership between private and public stakeholders.

On city centre development

City centre development has mainly been described as a positive development for the city. The refurbishment of city centres has been stressed as an answer to the increased competition between the city centre and external shopping areas, and as key in strengthening the competitiveness of regions (see for example Johansson, 1999; Naturskyddsforeningen, 2006; Stadsmiljörådet, 2003; Söderlind, 1998). Furthermore, city centre development has been described as a means to the improvement of social life in the city, and a way for social factors to be prioritised over other considerations such as traffic planning, providing better preconditions for more liveable and democratic city life (see for example Gehl and Gemzøe, 2004). This can be seen in the light of the notion of a specific Swedish (or Nordic) approach to architecture and planning, where factors like liveability, democracy, and citizen participation are often associated with welfare planning as practiced in the Nordic countries. In this context, the refurbishment of the central areas of cities has been described as part of the Nordic planning tradition, with a strong emphasis on the social values of the city.³

Thus, the city centre has in many regards become a symbol of socially, economically, and environmentally sustainable development, and city centre development has been seen as emblematic of the strengthening of democratic and social values often associated with Nordic planning. At the same time, criticism has been levelled at the transformation of city centres, the argument being that the central parts of cities are often characterised by gentrification processes involving the displacement of businesses and people that do not fit into the new urban environment, which is oriented toward tourism, consumption, culture and exclusive residential areas (see for example Sernhede and Johansson, 2006, p.13; Thörn and Holgersson, 2014).

2 The analysis of the empirical material has included qualitative elaborations of texts, pictures, maps and drawings relating to the transformation of the city of Jönköping's city centre. A more extensive version of the empirical analyses is presented in my doctoral thesis (Fredriksson, 2014), while this paper is more focused on the theoretical argumentation.

3 See for example New Nordic: Architecture & Identity. 29.6.2012–4.11.2012, Louisiana Museum of Modern Art.

Furthermore, critics have pointed out that the focus on the city centre creates and consolidates a polarisation between centre and periphery. For example, Moa Tunström has argued that the city centre has been described as “the real city” within Swedish planning discourse, while the suburb and the peripheries of cities have been regarded as “non-city” (2009). As Tunström notices, this is not only interesting in itself, but is reflective of society at large, since this type of inclusion and exclusion process reflects societal norms of “us” and “them” (2009, p.15). A similar perspective is also raised by Per Wirtén in a critical discussion of the role of the Swedish suburb. Wirtén identifies a historical and contemporary hierarchisation between the city centre and its hinterland. He argues that the city centre today represents a new zone of the bourgeois, which establishes and maintains the hierarchies of the city by distancing itself from the everyday life of the suburb (2010, p.315).

The emphasis on the city centre in planning practice and contemporary urban planning and design discourse can, from these perspectives, be seen as a planning strategy that establishes and maintains a spatial hierarchy by directing a great deal of resources towards strengthening a limited part of the city, a part which already occupies a strong position in the urban hierarchy. It demonstrates that the relationship between centre and periphery in the city comprises aspects of spatial power, and highlights the fact that planning practice’s production of urban space cannot be understood as a neutral process, but as a basically political process that is deeply embedded in societal hierarchies and power relations.

Yet city centre development tends to be described as a self-evident and unproblematic planning strategy. In Jönköping, the Swedish city taken as an example in this paper, the overall goal for the city centre transformation project is to strengthen the city centre and create “the most attractive city centre of its size in Scandinavia” (Jönköping Municipality, 2008b, p.3). The focus on city centre development within municipal planning is mainly motivated by a view of the city centre as a driving force for regional development. For example, in the planning documents it is stated that “experience and research show that attractive city centres are an important characteristic with great importance for the prosperity of the city and the region” (Jönköping Municipality, 2002, p.3, author’s translation), that “a living city with a vibrant city centre is an important factor of attraction” (Jönköping Municipality, 2008b, p.9), and that it is important that a “growth strategy” is based on “the role played by its core and its interaction with the entire regional area” (Jönköping Municipality, 2008b, p.22). This perspective is also strengthened by a number of investigations conducted by Jönköping International Business School, pointing to the importance of an attractive city centre to create regional growth (Johansson, 1999; Jönköping Municipality, 2010b; Pettersson and Nilsson, 2007; Pettersson, 2010).

Constructions of “The Attractive City”

The view of the city centre as a driving force for regional development must be understood in relationship to the notion of the transformation towards a post-industrial society.⁴ Through its cooperation with researchers at Jönköping International Business School, Jönköping municipality is in this context strongly influenced by Richard Florida’s theory of the creative class, which has had an enormous impact in both research and municipal planning practice. Based on a background narrative of urban growth and interurban competition, Florida argues that instead of business investments and natural resources being the crucial factors for regional development, regions today are dependent on attracting, and maintaining, attractive workforces. The most interesting group of people in this context, according to Florida, is the so-called “creative class”, a group of people mainly working within science and engineering, architecture and design, education, art, music and entertainment, with creativity as their main tool in the labour market. Around this super creative core, there is a broader group of people working, for example, in business and finance, and law and health care (Florida, 2002).

From this perspective, place is given special importance, since it is argued that people, or at least people who are considered to be a driving force for economic development, are moving to places where they find it attractive to live. Thus, according to this model, jobs follow people, rather than the other way around. Therefore, the city should offer places that attract (the right kinds of) people and visitors, and thereby create urban development and economic growth. To be attractive to the creative class, Florida states that places should be characterised by openness, diversity, and tolerance, should offer a rich variety of “authentic” activities and experiences, and should host an interesting variety of cafés, restaurants, entertainment, shopping and leisure activities (Florida, 2002).

According to Florida, this kind of post-industrial urban life can mainly be found in “the city”, seen here as a melting pot for innovation and creativity. Moving from a period of the decline of “the city”, benefitting the development of the urban periphery, Florida now sees an increasing interest in “the city”, which, he argues, is the main arena for the metropolitan creative lifestyle. With this as his starting point, Florida traces a development “back to the city” (2002, pp. 285–291) and thereby accedes to the narrative of the “comeback of the city”, a notion that has had a great impact in the contemporary discourse on cities (Tunström, 2009).

These kinds of narratives of the post-industrial city can be seen not only as descriptions of ongoing societal changes, they have also to a large extent come to function as manuals of municipal planning practice, in Sweden and in many other countries. This is obvious in the studied material in Jönköping. Based on Florida’s theory, the municipality argues for the importance of creating an attractive urban environment that

4 This transformation of society has been hailed under names such as the post-industrial society, the knowledge society (Florida, 2002) and the information society (Castells, 2000). It has also been questioned whether (Western) society really has been transformed from an industrial society to a post-industrial society, since we are still dependent on industry, but have outsourced production to other parts of the world (see for example Soja, 2000, p.164 ff). However, the transformation in itself is not in focus here, but rather how the construction or notion of the post-industrial society creates preconditions for planning practice.

can strengthen the city in the interurban competition. The municipality stresses that the functions, content, and characteristics of the city “are becoming increasingly important in the competition between towns and cities” (Jönköping Municipality, 2008b, p.9). Furthermore, it is stressed that tolerance creates “new ideas, innovations and entrepreneurial ventures” (Jönköping Municipality, 2008b, p.13), that diversity has “positive economic impact” (ibid., p.12) and that a rich cultural life can attract “the municipal inhabitant as well as the temporary visitor” (Jönköping Municipality, 2000, author’s translation).

Constructions of the post-industrial city centre

The post-industrial urbanity, described as the driving force for regional development, is in the studied planning process strongly connected to the city centre. In text, photos, inspirational images and collages, the city centre is constructed as a place characterised by consumption, entertainments, and events, a place where you watch dance performances, concerts and outdoor cinema in the streets and take part in bustling street life (Jönköping City AB, Destination Jönköping and Jönköping Municipality, 2010 pp.12, 13, 22; Jönköping Municipality, 2008a p.24; Jönköping Municipality, 2012, p.12), apparently totally free from labour, everyday life, and production. The city centre is described as a “multifunctional” place where “experiences and recreation have come to have larger and larger importance” (Jönköping Municipality, 2010a, p.4, author’s translation) and as a place that offers “exciting shops, bustling street life, restaurants and cafés, diversity and experiences” (Jönköping City AB, 2009, author’s translation).

The city centre is also described as an urban space characterised by the kind of openness, tolerance, and diversity which, according to Florida, is required by the creative class. The city centre is, among other things, described as “the soul and natural meeting-place of the city” where people can meet in “openness and tolerance” (Den goda staden, 2008, author’s translation), it is described as “the obvious meeting-place and ‘living-room’ for everyone irrespective of gender, age or origin” (Jönköping Municipality, 2000, author’s translation) and as a place where there is “room for everyone” (Jönköping Municipality, 2011, author’s translation). Furthermore, the city centre is described as a “social and cultural growth factor” (Jönköping City AB, 2010, author’s translation), a “collective resource”, and the ultimate bearer of “the most prominent reflection of collectively shared values” for the city and the region (Jönköping Municipality, 2008b, p.22).

Within the planning process, the aim is also to spread this post-industrial urbanity to the surrounding areas by extending the city centre in a southerly direction.⁵ This is done through a kind of spatial (re)construction aiming to incorporate the area south of the city centre into the city

5 The extended city centre was named “The Core”, (Swedish: “Kärnan”) (see Figure 1).

centre. From being an environment characterised by the industrial city's "functional separation, car dependency and hard surfaces" (Jönköping Municipality, 2012, p.20, author's translation), the municipality wants this area to be transformed into an "inner city". In this process, the aim is to transform the area into a "mixed-city", a concept that has come to be approximately synonymous with the block city form in contemporary planning discourse, and the use of the concept can be seen as reflecting a desire to break with the modernist planning model and the industrial city structure, and to relate instead to the classical European inner-city (see Tunström, 2009). The mixed-city in the Jönköping case is described as a place with a diversity of meeting places, cafés, and restaurants (Jönköping Municipality, 2002, p.38), which is characterised by experiences, tourism, and recreation, and which is an arena for activities, festivals and art-and cultural arrangements (Jönköping Municipality, 2010a, pp.7, 9, 20).

Critique of "The Attractive City"

Thus, the city centre is constructed as the ultimate post-industrial locus of a new economy, which can attract (creative) inhabitants and visitors and thereby strengthen the competitiveness of the city. In the city centre, the post-industrial city is given a place; a specific locality and belonging. As place, the city centre becomes a symbol for the break with modernism and the industrial city, and for the solution to the challenges of the post-industrial era. From this perspective, city centre development becomes a planning strategy that benefits everyone and concerns everyone.

This constructs a "we" without a "they", which makes questions of who the city centre represents, or whose space it is, irrelevant within the given context. The chosen planning strategies become neutralised; they are not seen as a political priority, whereby one part of the city is strengthened in relation to other parts of the city, but as a development without losers, which manifests the city as part of a post-modern society. This construction of the role and meaning of the city centre is grounded in a view of regional growth and competitiveness as the all-encompassing goals of planning practice. Based on this reasoning, city centre development is described as an answer to a change of system, understood as an obvious and inescapable precondition for physical planning (Andersson, et al., 2006; Jönköping Municipality, 2008a; Jönköping Municipality, 2010a). However, several critics have questioned this view, and have pointed out that the changed focus in urban planning, from distributing resources to creating regional development and economic growth, leads to an increasing polarisation of the city, and tends to increase the gaps between those who fit in and are regarded as a driving force in the new societal order, and those who do not. In a well-known paper from 1989, David Harvey calls attention to the rise of entrepreneurial urban

strategies that lead to a situation where social issues are not handled as a primary goal, but as something that comes as an effect of economic growth. By focusing on economic growth, the intention is to achieve positive distribution effects for the whole region and for all inhabitants. However, Harvey argues that the focus on entrepreneurial urban strategies renders welfare for all inhabitants no longer a primary goal, but something that is treated as a side effect of economic growth. According to Harvey, this change of focus from a general endeavour toward welfare to single selective measures tends to divert attention from issues concerning larger geographical areas (Harvey, 1989, pp.7–8).

Jamie Peck has also formulated a similar critique (2005). In a critical discussion of Florida's theory of the creative class, he calls attention to the fact that Florida directs focus toward promoting people that are seen as driving forces for the economy, rather than supporting the ones that lack creative potential, which is considered to be the success factor in the new economic system. Those outside the creative class are not given any positive role in the new societal order, and can only receive positive effects from what might trickle down from above. In this way, the interests and preferences of the ruling class are taken as norms for developing the whole city.

Spatial power relations

On these grounds, there are reasons to assume that the increased focus on city centre development is not a process that benefits everyone and concerns everyone. Rather than being a common public space for everyone, the city centre should hence be understood as a political space, deeply embedded in societal hierarchies and power relations. Therefore, I will focus on the power aspects of constructing urban space in the planning process.

The notion of city centre development as a key to the city's and region's success is based on a range of reasonings, which are passably rational within their own logic. However, as Chantal Mouffe has argued, "things could always be otherwise and therefore every order is predicted on the exclusion of other possibilities" (Mouffe, 2005, p.18). From this perspective, the structuring of society can never be complete, but is instead basically open and temporal. Its meaning can never be totally fixed, which opens the possibility for a constant struggle of meaning (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Something which at a specific time appears to be natural and common sensical is never an expression of a profound objectivity, but rather of a dominating view.

Instead of Florida's individualistic identity politics, where identities are taken for granted and one argues for the tolerance of differences, I will argue that identities cannot be regarded as essential units, but as something that emerges from identification processes. According to Mouffe,

“the creation of an identity implies the establishment of a difference, difference which is often constructed on the basis of a hierarchy” (Mouffe, 2005, p.15). The basic idea here is that identities are *relational*. Thus, the distinction and the designation of something other, something external, is a precondition for every identity. Mouffe calls this external the “constitutive outside”. At the same time as identities are constructed, they are set in specific relationships of dominance and control to one each other. Identities are often constructed through more or less institutionalised power practices that create patterns of dominance, for example: men over women, doctors over patients, teachers over students (example from Torfing, 1999, p.164).

In the same way that individuals’ identities are established by relationships, Doreen Massey argues that space must also be understood as a result of relationships rather than of static and innate qualities. This means that spatial identities, such as place, region or nation, must be understood in relational terms, as constructed by differentiating themselves from what they are not, their constitutive outsides (Massey, 2004, p.1; Massey, 2005). Spatial identity is constructed and reconstructed, and by means of the same process, different spaces are placed in specific relationships of dominance and dependency to each other.⁶

This perspective involves an anti-essentialist approach to space. Space is not a result of a fixed, innate essence with its own absolute identity, but of constantly shifting, dynamic and ambiguous relations (Harvey, 2006; Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2005; Soja, 1996). From this perspective, space and power are understood in a dialectic relationship, where power produces space, as space simultaneously sets the preconditions for how power is distributed. Thus, the focus is not on specific groups’ or individuals’ power over space, but on power as part of creating and forming space. Seen from this perspective, space is imbued with power, and the ways in which proximity, distance, and spatial relationships are defined and understood cannot be separated from the power practices that are part of creating space (Allen, 2011). Power is thus studied as both a productive and limiting force which creates space and spatial hierarchies while at the same time ruling out alternative meanings and relationships in the urban landscape.

The constitutive outside of the city centre

Taking my lead from Chantal Mouffe and Doreen Massey, I will focus on how and in what conditions the role and meaning of the city centre, i.e. its *spatial identity*, is constructed and consolidated. Following Mouffe and Massey, the spatial identity of the city centre must be understood in relational terms. It is established not only on the basis of innate qualities of place, but also in relation to something else, something outside.

6 This concept of place should be understood as a fundamentally different approach than the one within architectural theory as a widespread phenomenological concept of place, which mainly has been promoted by Christian Norberg-Schulz. According to this phenomenological concept of place, the meaning of place is seen as an internal fundamental essence in place (Norberg-Schulz, 1976).

Thus, at the same time as the post-industrial city centre is established, the “other” of space is constructed as its constitutive outside. This creation of spatial identities is characterised by the power relations that permeate society, and also forms part of the establishment of these power relations. This becomes clear if one understands the construction of the city centre from a postcolonial perspective.

Within the postcolonial field, it has been emphasised that “the other” is constructed as a negation of “rational”, Western identity. Identities are constructed in a power relationship, where “the Western world” is given an interpretative prerogative to describe “the other”. This other’s identity is created by a mix of fear and fascination for its “otherness”. This otherness is represented by inhabitants of colonies, slums of big cities, and by women at home, also described in colonial terms (Ericsson, Molina and Ristilammi, 2002, p.27; Ristilammi, 2006, p.221). “The other” tends to be described as driven by emotions, tied to their culture, and primitive, while the white man constructs his self-image as rational, universal, and enlightened. Furthermore, people from other parts of the world than the “West” tend to be understood as representatives of their cultures, while people from “West”, especially men, can speak without the expectation of representing a specific place or culture (Lundahl, 2002, p.11). Consequently, being in the centre of power means holding the privilege of representing the universal, while being outside the centre of power places one in the role of representing the particular and the specific.

Several critics have pointed out that a colonial line of thought also characterises the view of the Swedish Million Programme suburb, where this represents non-normality, an exception from the rest of society (see for example Ericsson, Molina and Ristilammi, 2002; Ristilammi, 2003; Wirtén, 2010).⁷ As with colonial explorers, the white middle class man has travelled out to this suburb to map, become fascinated by, and also afraid of the differences in the suburb. The suburb has been described as criminally burdened and dangerous, but also as exotic and vibrant, and is thereby associated with both negative and positive qualities that tend to stigmatise the place (Ericsson, Molina and Ristilammi, 2002, p.104; Ristilammi, 2003, p.11). Furthermore, critics have pointed out that the construction of space and individuals’ identities are tightly connected. The identity of the colonised is constructed as dangerous and dark, but also as authentic and genuine, as it is also with colonised spaces (Ericsson, Molina and Ristilammi, 2002, p.30). In the same way, the identities of “the immigrant” and “the Million Programme suburb” are bound so tightly together that the connection between “the other” and “the other’s space” is neutralised.

Initially, the Million Programme suburb represented the new and most modern society, and people moving there were seen as the productive and democratic people of the future. But at the same time as the

7 Within the Million Programme different housing types were built. However, it is mainly the areas with high-rise buildings in the suburbs that have been stigmatised in these types of discourses.

suburb represented the most modern, it was also seen as something other, detached from the rest of the city (Ristilammi, 2006, p.215). At the beginning of the 1970s, the Million Programme suburb began to lose its utopian identity, and by the 1980s, it had started to become a symbol for the “non-Swedish”. Today, the view of the suburb as something other than the rest of the city is still present, but the modernity of the suburb has lost its positive symbolism. Instead, the suburb is regarded as anachronistic or modern in the wrong way, and as a place without history and identity. In contrast to the inner city, the periphery is not seen as something that can be transformed into the new post-industrial society, but as a relic of the past, or a place for those who occupy the role of losers in the new society. Hence places like the Million Programme suburb are inevitably placed *after* the rest of the city in a constructed line of development (Ericsson, Molina and Ristilammi, 2002, p.28).

In light of this, the construction of the city centre’s spatial identity has to be understood as characterised by a colonial model of thought, while the spatial identity of the Million Programme suburb is constructed as a negation to the construction of the spatial identity of the inner city. The creative class and the post-industrial inner city are here constructed as opposite to “the other”; the creative class is connected to specific characteristics, such as tolerance and creativity, and to the city centre that becomes a representative for the tolerant and creative space where a diversity of people can meet. While the suburb is constructed as anachronistic, tied to culture and otherness, the city centre is constructed as a contemporary and generic space which can represent everybody and concerns everyone. While the suburb has been described as a place for homogenisation and conformism, a place with too weak a public life, where people do not manage to meet (Ristilammi, 2006; Tunström, 2009, p.120; Wirtén, 2010), the city centre is constructed as a tolerant place where people with different backgrounds can meet in public space. And while the suburb is described as an anachronistic problem area, the city centre is seen as a place that is a driving force for urban and regional development by being a bearer of competitiveness and attractiveness for the whole region.

Bio-power and space

Thus, the construction of the inner city cannot be separated from the construction of its constitutive outside. From this perspective, the studied city development process can be seen as a planning strategy that establishes and maintains differences in the city, which strengthens the already strong position of the city centre in the urban hierarchy, and places centre and periphery in a relationship of power. This can be understood as a power strategy that diverts power, resources, and space for action from other parts of the city. At the same time, the studied city centre development process in Jönköping is not characterised by a disciplinary and limiting view of the urban periphery.

So, how can power be understood in this context? Drawing on Michel Foucault's bio-politics, power here needs to be understood as productive; it creates discourses, meaning, identities, space, institutions, and social relationships. However, power should not only be seen as a positive force, but simultaneously as limiting, since the construction of discourses, identities, space, and society also means the exclusion of alternatives. It is a type of power that operates through people, rather than over them.⁸

In an interpretation of neo-liberalism based on Foucault's bio-politics, Johanna Oksala argues that neo-liberalism creates a specific type of reality, with a specific approach to power, truth, and subjectivity (2013). In this system, the market is the prescribed truth system. Neo-liberalism has won the contest to define truth, and the goal of maximising economic wealth has become a truth not open to question. Economic growth is seen as the only way to provide good living conditions, and the market verifies political action by making good governance equal to what works on the market. Oksala points out that this neo-liberal model has won the struggle of truth even in countries that have traditionally had a strong welfare system, such as the Nordic countries (2013, p.61).

This system has redrawn the line between economics and politics. It creates a relationship between political power and economic knowledge, where good governance is equal to what works according to an economic scientific truth. This economic truth is regarded as objective, universal, and politically neutral, and arguing against it is often seen as irrational. Oksala argues that this system reduces the space for political action. The system creates a model for understanding social reality where political action is viewed through economic analysis, and political decisions must be based on economic knowledge. From this perspective, politics is reduced to finding a solution that ensures the largest economic wealth possible, based on economic analysis (2013).

Furthermore, Oksala argues that the system produces a specific type of subjectivity; the economic subject. This economic subject presupposes the human being as a profit maximising individual with a natural will to focus on his or her own interests. Competition thus becomes the dominating principle driving human action, and being competitive becomes the foremost goal, on all levels and scales (2013). Thus, the system incites us to compete, and being competitive becomes the superior method of reaching success.

The case and its bio-power

How can Jönköping municipality's goal of creating "the most attractive city centre of its size in Scandinavia" be understood from this perspective? As part of this goal, interurban competition is embedded as a background narrative, where strengthening the city in the interurban com-

8 This reasoning is based on Sven-Olov Wallenstein's interpretation of Foucault's bio-politics. Wallenstein's interpretation of Foucault's bio-politics is mainly based on Foucault's lectures, which he argues give quite a different picture of Foucault's bio-politics than his published writings (Wallenstein, 2013).

petition is seen as a self-evident overall goal for urban planning. Market logic becomes the all-embracing truth system for municipal planning, and city centre development becomes a way to respond to the given logic, where the ability to compete and measure up is demanded. From this perspective, the planning of the city cannot principally be seen as a power strategy that oppresses and inhibits the inhabitants of the city. Rather, planning practice conforms to the system, acclimatises to the given logic by acting like an economic subject.

This can be seen as an example of how the neo-liberal model has won the struggle of truth within Swedish planning practice, a country that traditionally has a strong welfare system based on social democratic values. From this perspective, the increased interest in city centre development, with its strong emphasis on competitiveness and attractiveness, can be understood as a part of what has been described as a shift in the Swedish political system that has been under way since the 1980s, a political turn to the right including marketisation, privatisation, and decentralisation (Larsson, 2012). Thus, city centre development can be seen as a way of conforming to a new political order, rather than being understood as part of a Nordic planning tradition based in traditional social democratic values.

Still working with Foucault's theory, one can also see the experts involved in the studied planning process as an expression of how the border between politics and economics gets displaced. The cooperation between the municipality and Jönköping International Business School is described in an evaluation report as a background material that has given the politicians enough "informative basis" to "dare to" invest money in the project in competition with requests for investments in healthcare and the school system (Pettersson and Nilsson, 2007, pp.20–21, author's translation). The experts here provide the municipality with what are regarded as scientific truths for successful planning, all based on an unspoken logic of economic growth. Prioritisations in municipal planning are thereby not seen as political issues, but as a question of having the right knowledge.⁹ Economic science verifies political action, and works as a guideline for the formulation of municipal planning strategies. At the same time, the space of political action and urban planning and design competence are reduced to an issue of finding the planning strategies that are the best response to the given economic analysis.

In this model, there is no room for the constructive potential of politics to create and effect social change. Instead, politics has a reactive function with its main focus on strengthening the city in interurban competition. The political is here displaced by a choice between right and wrong, a shift that neutralises the actual decision taken, and makes it hard to question. Thus, the exceptional position that the city centre is given in the spatial hierarchies of the city is legitimised by selective scientific

9 The "political" shall in this context not be understood as the same as "politics". While "politics" is a concept focusing on the political institutions and practice, the "political" is a concept that highlights the political dimension in society, constituted by power relations (Mouffe, 2005, p.17 f).

truths, at the same time as issues concerning how planning contributes to the creation and consolidation of spatial hierarchies are not given any attention within the given context.

Concluding remarks

Based on the increased interest in city centre development in planning practice, both in the Nordic countries and in several other European countries, this paper has focused on the role of the city centre within contemporary urban planning, and on what this means for how differences and hierarchies in the city are established and maintained.

The studied transformation of Jönköping's city centre shows how the city centre is given a unique role in the city, and how the relationship between centre and periphery is established as a hierarchical relationship between the core and its hinterland. This is grounded in a notion of the need to conform to the post-industrial society, which is said to have changed the preconditions for municipal planning and to have created a need for an increased focus on interurban competition and urban growth. Based on economic logic as the basis for regional development, the city centre is emphasised as an important driving force for the development of the whole region. The city centre is seen as a bearer of competitiveness, of post-industrial urbanity, and as a generic place, where everyone can take part on an equal basis.

At the same time, there is research highlighting the fact that the urban periphery, mainly represented by the Swedish Million Programme suburb, is constructed as an exception, an anachronistic difference, and a societal and spatial outside. This relationship creates and consolidates a spatial hierarchy between the city centre and its hinterland, where the city centre (and its inhabitants) are cast as a driving force for development and a key to success, while other parts of the city are not given any positive role in the contemporary and future societal order.

Thus, a spatial and societal inside and outside is constructed. At the same time, the power dimension in the formation of urban space is rendered invisible by the neutralisation of political choices. The opportunity for alternatives is thus displaced to the margins, and the question of how urban space is to be designed becomes a matter of finding the right strategies in order to meet an obvious goal, rather than a choice between different political alternatives. Here, planning to a large extent lacks a vision of the social, instead economic analysis is taken as a starting point.

This paper argues that city centre development, with its strong emphasis on competitiveness and attractiveness, can be understood as part of a comprehensive shift within Swedish planning system, and Swedish

politics at large, where the neo-liberal model has won the struggle to define truth. At the same time, political issues and power relations are not made visible within the planning process.

This calls attention to the need to understand what is deeply political in the shaping of urban space, where the construction of urban space not only reflects societal norms and power relations, but also plays an active part in the shaping of society. From this perspective, this paper can be seen as a call for a political discussion about the consequences of and potential alternatives to current planning, a discussion that does not stop at a choice between different strategies in order to attain a common and never questioned goal, but which asks in earnest the critical questions of what kind of city, and what kind of society, there is a desire to create.

Figure 1
Aerial photo of the transformation area in Jönköping, from Urban Development vision 2.0 (Jönköping Municipality, 2008a, p.2)



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