

Making the People's landscape: Landscape ideals, collective labour, and the People's parks (*Folkets Parker*) movement in Sweden, 1891–present



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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the 1890s, workers' associations and social-democratic activists in Sweden developed a series of People's Parks (*Folkets parker*) that extended across the length and breadth of the country. By the mid-twentieth century, nearly every city, town, and village boasted its own People's Park. Built for relaxation and recreation, as well as for political agitation, *Folkets parker* also represented a significant expropriation and transformation of bourgeois landscape ideals and in the process became places where a new, working class-based *folk*, or people, could come to be. This paper traces the production of *Folkets parker* as landscape, focusing on the ways in which working people reworked landscape ideals in order to contest bourgeois constructions of Swedish national identity, while asserting their own power to shape that identity. We argue that working people traded in, and transformed, two landscape ideas – one rooted in bourgeois notions of the rural idyll and the other rooted in an older more specifically Scandinavian tradition of landscape as a shaped space belonging to those who shaped it. But we also show how, as the social-democratic state consolidated its hegemony in the middle-twentieth century, the underlying material basis for shaping the parks as landscape was transformed. *Folkets parker* became places primarily for recreation and entertainment and their status as shaped spaces that shaped identity faded.

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'To write Nässjö's People's Park history is to a large extent to also describe the Swedish People's Parks movement. A history where assiduous work, sacrifice and a never flagging optimism constituted the creative power in the movement'.¹

The wrecking crews arrived in October 2011. Down came the bandstand and the dance pavilion. Down came the theater. Down came the coffee house and bar. Flowerbeds, long-since overgrown, were ripped up. Paths were plowed under. Eventually nearly every tree was cut down, uprooted, and hauled away. Nässjö's *Folkets park* (People's Park), which had once been the primary meeting place for Nässjö's working population, and which had also been a primary

example – both typical and extraordinary at once – of a working class-built *landscape*, was no more, save for the impressive, arched stone entry gate that had been built in 1917 (Figs. 1 and 2).²

The nearly 3-ha large *Folkets park* had been sold to the Nässjö municipality earlier in the year by the workers' association that owned and operated it. The park had been founded in 1907, when the association laid out 4000 Swedish crowns to buy an empty tract of evergreen and birch forest that separated two new housing areas in this fast-growing, industrial town halfway between Stockholm and Malmö in southern Sweden. Purchased as part of the just as fast-growing national People's Parks and People's Houses movement, it, along with similar parks up and down the country, provided a foundation – literally a *space*, or rather a network of spaces

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¹ Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation (1930) *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation: En Kort-fattad Redogörelse över Folkparkernas Utveckling 1905–1930*, Eskilstuna, 1930, 68. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the authors.

² In 1959 nearly 57,000 people visited; Nässjö's population at the time was under 16,000. Gunvor Wessling Grahnat, 94-årig folkpark var älskad, *Smålands Tidningen* 13 February 2014; population figures from <http://ortshistoria.se/stad/nassjo/befolkning#2> (accessed 22 June 2020); Nässjö – Folkets Park rivs inom kort, *SVT Nyheter*, 29 September 2011.



Fig. 1. Map of Sweden, with places in the text and accompanying figures marked. Cartography by Erik Jönsson.

– within which the budding working-class and democratic-socialist movements could meet, formulate their demands, and eventually seize the reins of national power in Sweden. Just as much, *Folkets parker* developed into significant *places*, where working families enjoyed picnics and strolling along wooded trails, kids played on swings and swung clubs at mini-golf courses, teens and adults danced to touring bands, restaurants were visited on special occasions, and banquets were held to commemorate important events (Fig. 3). In extraordinary times, like the 1909 general strike, they became both political meeting grounds where news was exchanged and solidarity reinforced, and in some cases

places where striking workers could get free or cheap bread (Fig. 4).³ In Nässjö, despite threats from an alarmed (and armed) bourgeoisie, socialist agitators spoke at the park at least three times a day during the strike, which also hosted the largest strike meetings, sometimes exceeding 500 participants.⁴

This is to some degree extraordinary, since only three years earlier there had been no People's Park in Nässjö. But in a quite short time, and like many of the other *Folkets parker* across Sweden, the building of the park transformed more-or-less empty space into cherished place within what increasingly became a standard labour-movement constellation of unions, party branches, People's Parks, People's Houses, and educational organizations. It did so by appropriating and reworking a set of landscape ideals – ways of shaping the land after a bucolic ideal – more closely associated with the bourgeoisie than with the working classes.⁵ As the workers association wrote in a publication commemorating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation* (FPC, People's Parks' Central Organization), Nässjö's 'park has a naturally beautiful and domineering position with a delightful view over the town and its surroundings'. But as it also wrote, turning a wood where there existed 'only a single, small footpath through the quagmires' into such a 'naturally beautiful' place took a huge amount of collective work – work that was already fading when the wrecking crews arrived in 2011 (Fig. 5).⁶

For what Nässjö municipality wanted, when it bought the park that year, was not so much the People's Park *landscape* that had been created over the course of a century, but the People's Park *land*, land upon which new housing could be built.⁷ The job for the wrecking crews, that is, was to finish the job, to erase the landscape Nässjö workers had built, and turn it instead into a blank slate – an empty and cleared site – ready to be built anew, now as *Bostadsområdet Folkets Park* (People's Park residential area), which, with its mix of single-family, semi-detached, and multiple-dwelling houses, would 'offer attractive, accessible, modern dwelling[s] for all'.⁸ Such a transformation was hardly surprising because it reflected a real and significant shift in the material basis for landscape production in Sweden over the past generation.⁹

Our goal in this paper is to examine the ways in which working people in industrializing Sweden expropriated and reworked the bourgeois landscape ideal so as to produce a landscape within which working people could make themselves into working class

³ Johan Pries, Erik Jönsson, and Don Mitchell, Parks and houses for the people, *Places Journal* (May 2020): <https://placesjournal.org/article/swedish-social-democratic-parks-and-houses-for-the-people/> (accessed 22 June 2020). The official, and thus far most complete, history of the *Folkets hus* and *Folkets parker* movement is Margareta Ståhl, *Möten och Människor I Folkets Hus och Folkets Park*, Stockholm, 2005.

⁴ Josef Rydén, *Nässjö under Järnvägsepoken*, Värnamo, 1981, 148.

⁵ On the relation between space, place, and landscape, see Kenneth Olwig, *The Meanings of Landscape*, Abingdon, 2019.

⁶ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 68.

⁷ The municipality wavered in the degree to which it wanted to retain aspects of the landscape ideal Nässjö's workers had put into place. One early detailed development plan actually called for "preserving part [of the area] as a reminder" that there had once been a *Folkets park* on the site, including preserving one of the allés of trees. But the plan was soon changed to allow for housing development over the whole site. Madeleine Fransson, *Folkets park lever kvar*, *Smålands Dagblad*, 9 July 2014.

⁸ <https://nassjo.se/nassjo-vaxer/bostadsomraden/bostadsomraden/2018-05-09-bostadsomradet-folkets-park.html> (accessed 22 June 2020).

⁹ Nässjö was not alone: Several other (former) People's Parks, such as in Linköping, were also transformed into housing around the same time.



Fig. 2. The Nässjö People's Park gates, one of the few remaining reminders of the landscape workers built in this small industrial city in the early twentieth-century. Photograph by Anders Franzén, Johnsköpings lans museum (public domain).

people, to make themselves, that is, into a people, a *folk*.¹⁰ Focusing not only on Nässjö but also on the broader People's Park movement, we show how this effort to create *Folkets parker* as landscapes was rooted in a set of material conditions that, as it were, demanded collective, grass-roots action. As this collective action was drawn into and formalized within the state after the Social Democrats won power, however, the material conditions changed. Working-class interests were channeled into the state by the social-democratic party's postwar election-winning streak, and the way that the popular – the *folk* – was constructed to align with and express working-class politics shifted. Rather than grassroots movements directly intervening in the landscape and the ideals it expressed, the social democratic party marshalled all the technocratic expertise of the state to scale up the rearticulation of bourgeois landscape ideals and the translation of working-class interests into

popular interests.¹¹ Though the appropriation of the pastoral lingered in modernist welfare landscapes of public parks, playgrounds, and an almost entirely unrestrained right to use private lands for outdoor recreation (*friluftsliv*), such state intervention simultaneously undermined the cultural grassroots institutions that had pioneered the deployment of such ideals before the Social Democrats had access to the levers of state power. While the rise of commercial mass culture (especially television), the growing availability of other cultural venues as deindustrialization took hold, and an increasing municipal reluctance to fund the parks (especially where the Social Democrats lost power) all contributed to the decline of the *Folkets parker* after the 1960s, so too did this shift play a crucial role.¹² With their political function as a way for the working class to make landscapes, and thus intervene in the making of the people, fading, little held back the parks from being put up for sale and redevelopment in places like Nässjö.

Landscape – and landscape ideals

'But those who then held the park company's fate in their hands were men with foresight. With genuine Småland resilience and obstinacy, they went to work. Roads were laid, clearing, stone-

¹⁰ Generally, see, Ernesto Laclau, 'Socialism', the 'people', 'democracy': the transformation of hegemonic logic, *Social Text*, 7 (Spring - Summer 1983), 115–119. This effort to define the *folk*, to forge a people, stood in direct competition with more elite efforts to do the same thing, as with the national park movement discussed below, and concomitant ethnological efforts to define Sweden's culture regions and preserve its various folk cultures (in both local and national outdoor museums and in the discovery and recording of folklore). These efforts were often explicit in their efforts to frame the *folk* in such a way as to deny or obscure class divisions within society. The People's Park movement differed, as we will see, in its avowed working-class basis and its ethos of common, collective *work*. Rather than an elite project of definition, the parks represented a popular politics of making. See Mike Crang, Nation, region and homeland: history and tradition in Dalarna, Sweden, *Cultural Geographies [Ecumene]* 6 (1999), 447–470; Crang, Between academy and popular geographies: cartographic imagination and the cultural landscape of Sweden, in: I. Cook, D. Crouch, S. Naylor and J. Ryan (Eds), *Cultural Turns/Geographical Turns*. Harlow, UK, 2000, 88–108, and Jonas Frykman and Orvar Löfgren, *Culture Builders: A Historical Anthropology of Middle-Class Life*. New Brunswick, 1987.

¹¹ As will be discussed more fully below, Swedish historians (and geographers) have paid remarkably little attention to People's Parks, and no attention at all to their spatial dynamics, much less investigated them in relation to shifting landscape ideals within an industrializing society. While some attention has been paid to the parks' role in shaping mid-twentieth century popular culture, very little work has been undertaken examining their foundational (and sometimes quite contradictory) roll in Swedish social democracy. This current paper is part of a larger project by the authors to undertake this work. We are seeking to develop a full historical geography of the parks rise and decline and their place within the shifting, conflictual politics and political economy of twentieth century Sweden.

¹² See Peter Billing and Mikael Stigendal, *Hegemonins Decennier: Lärdomar från Malmö om den Svenska Modellen*, Malmö, 1994.

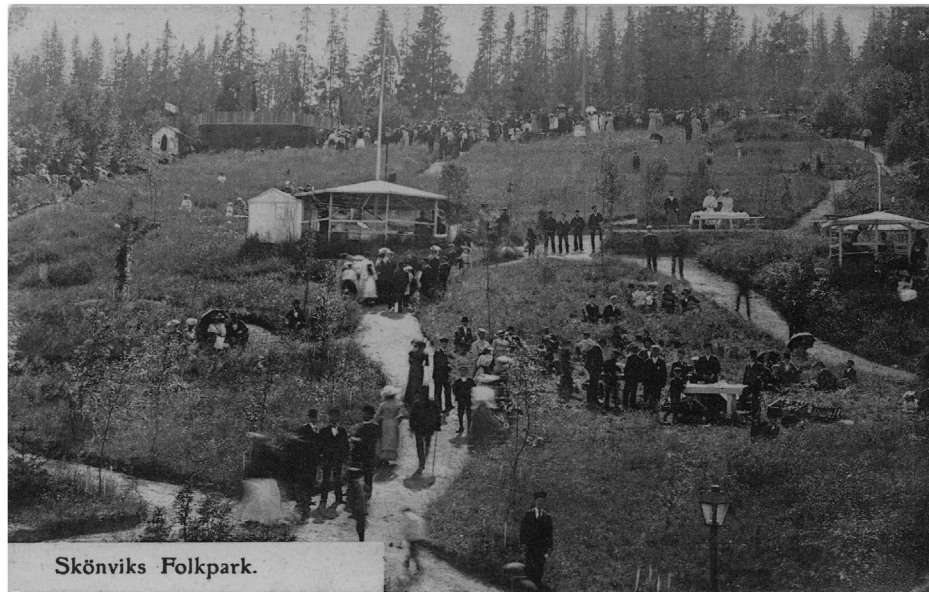


Fig. 3. The *Folket park* in Skönvik around 1910. Besides the walking trails, a *lusthus* (gazebo) can be spied in the center of the picture along with a dance floor at the top of the hill. Photographer unknown, Sundsvalls museum (public domain).



Fig. 4. Workers gathered in Sundsvall's People's Park during the 1909 General Strike. Across the country *Folkets parker* became essential gathering places – to get news, renew solidarity, and, in many to get free or cheap bread and other provisions. Photographer unknown, Sundsvalls museum (cc by-nc).



Fig. 5. Nässjö's Folkets park in the months before it was torn down, with the remnants of a mini-golf course in the middle-ground and the dance pavilion behind. To the right in the trees is the theater. Photographer unknown.

breaking, and draining was undertaken – all with freely given labour in such free time as was then available'.¹³

No wonder resilience and obstinacy were required. Not only did the Småland workers of Nässjö, intent on creating a landscape for the working class, have to dig out roots and stones, they also had to root out and turn over centuries of sedimented landscape ideology and practice built up across Europe in its long transition from feudalism to capitalism. Making the People's Park landscape was thus a great deal of work indeed. And yet, as Raymond Williams so influentially argued, 'a working country is hardly ever a landscape'.¹⁴ Perhaps more accurately, to be a modern European landscape, workers, obviously necessary to its making and maintenance, had to be shunted to 'the dark side of landscape', as John Barrell put it¹⁵ – either that or they and their work had to be romanticized and aestheticized, made acceptable to the connoisseur's eye.¹⁶ Barrell, like other art historians such as Anne Birmingham and Elizabeth Helsinger, was specifically concerned with how landscapes, and sometimes workers, appeared in landscape painting.¹⁷ But the point can be generalized: landscape as built form, and not only as representation, frequently and actively hides

the work that makes it.¹⁸ This is especially true because, in addition to being a 'stretch of inland scenery' (as standard dictionaries define it), landscape is also a 'stretch of inland scenery': a shaped land, either 'slowly built up by centuries of work, of patient, humble gestures', in Henri Lefebvre's words,¹⁹ or actively designed and constructed within specific social and political-economic contexts.²⁰

This latter sense of landscape – as a slowly built up as well as an actively made built form – predates the scenic, painterly definition of landscape. Indeed, as landscape theorists Ed Wall and Tim Waterman note, landscape 'was first understood as something produced through social and technological changes to the land, the manipulation of valleys and basins, coastal shores, rivers and wetlands to provide sustenance, shelter and defence';²¹ a claim that Kenneth Olwig has validated through extensive philological and historical-geographical research.²² This is 'landscape' in its morphological sense, in its sense as lived place.²³ While the

¹⁸ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 32; Don Mitchell, *The Lie of the Land: Migrant Workers and the California Landscape*, Minneapolis, 1996.

¹⁹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Critique of Everyday Life*, Vol. 1, London, 2008 (1991), 134.

²⁰ Don Mitchell, New axioms for reading the landscape: paying attention to political economy and social justice, in: J. Wescoat and D. Johnston (Eds), *Political Economies of Landscape Change*. Dordrecht, 2008, 29–50.

²¹ Ed Wall and Tim Waterman, Introduction: critical concerns of landscape, in: Wall and Waterman (Eds), *Landscape and Agency: Critical Essays*, London, 2018, 1.

²² Olwig, *The Meanings of Landscape*.

²³ Carl Sauer, The morphology of landscape, in: J. Leighly (Ed) *Land and Life: The Writings of Carl Ortwin Sauer*, Berkeley, 1963 (1925), 315–350; J.B. Jackson, *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*, New Haven, 1984; Shelley Egoz, Jala Makhzoumi, and Gloria Pungetti (Eds) *The Right to Landscape: Contesting Landscape and Human Rights*, Farnham, 2011.

¹³ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 68.

¹⁴ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*, Oxford, 1973, 120.

¹⁵ John Barrell, *The Dark Side of Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840*, Cambridge, 1983.

¹⁶ Denis Cosgrove, Prospect, perspective and the evolution of the landscape idea, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 10 (1985) 45–62.

¹⁷ Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition*, Berkeley, 1989; Elizabeth Helsinger, Turner and the representation of England, in: W.J.T. Mitchell (Ed) *Landscape and Power*, Chicago, 1995, 103–125.

morphological landscape may historically predate the scenic landscape, at least since the Renaissance, and particularly with the rise of first mercantile, and then industrial, capitalism these two aspects of landscape – ‘the world we are living in [and] a scene we are looking at’, in the words of John Wylie – have, however, been thoroughly and inextricably intertwined, and the historical order has been turned on its head. Landscape as a way of seeing, but particularly as a way of ordering the world before us, now quite often shapes the landscapes that we actually build rather than vice versa.²⁴

This is not necessarily an innocent process, a simple matter of picturing an idyllic scene and then seeking to create it on the ground. Rather, as Cosgrove explored, painterly depictions of landscape were closely bound up with the invention of single-point perspective, which allowed ‘the eye absolute mastery over space’, and its subsequent deployment as a technology for transforming land into property. Just as consequentially, ‘perspective directs the external world toward the individual located outside that space’. Perspective thus allowed for the separation of the individual from the scene s/he was observing, permitting land to *become* scenery – scenery which itself was both the ‘property of the individual detached observer’ and private property, that is, real estate, and thus the foundation for the accumulation of capital.²⁵ In this way, landscape as scenery enacted a double alienation: the alienation of the subject (the observer) from the object (the observed landscape) and the alienation of landscape (as separable, tradable property) from the land (as entangled ecology and society).²⁶ Such alienation historically took the form of enclosure and improvement, with the former being a necessary attribute of the latter: by its enclosure – its delimitation by walls and fences and its enforced ‘right to exclude’ as property – was landscape’s improvement made visible and tangible.²⁷ Yet the ideology of improvement ran deeper. It also entailed the remaking of the land after certain images of orderliness and control.²⁸ That is to say, the ongoing improvement of the land entailed a shift from land *becoming* scenery to land refashioned through the idealization of scenery. What had been a process of observed, external land translated to the medium of canvas, map, or (later) photograph, and idealized in the process, now became a process whereby the canvas, map, and photograph served as the

model for the land.²⁹ The whole history of landscaped manor grounds in England, as well as that of landscaped villas in Northern Italy, recapitulates this history of idealized image becoming shaped property.³⁰ Manor gardens and grounds, but also model villages, bourgeois urban neighborhoods, and newly-founded public parks were all shaped as landscapes, as space shaped in accordance with landscape ideals.³¹

These were elite ideals. Early landscaped estates were designed after an idealized image of nature – nature made bucolic and idyllic through its careful staging.³² Here nature was transformed from threatening wilderness to inviting garden, from a space of struggle and strife to a place of rural ease and retreat from the hurly-burly of everyday life. Such a rural idyll was framed as timeless, little changing, and therefore deeply conservative.³³ And it expressed a presumed rural order in which leisure rather than work defined valued status. The landscaped estate, the landscaped countryside, was shaped as a space of ease and comfort, at least for those who possessed – who had the ability to possess – the view.³⁴

By the mid-nineteenth century, as industrialization gained momentum, the rural idyll of landscape was refined into a forceful pastoralism. As Paul Cloke outlined, rural pastoralism, as defined by poets such as Wordsworth and Tennyson, or given spatial expression by Ruskin, stood ‘in contrast to the corrupted urbanism of the Industrial Revolution. Accordingly, rural landscapes became identified as that zone beyond industrialism; that space of nature that stands in pure contradistinction to the environmentally and morally degenerative impacts of industrialization’.³⁵ Almost: for as Raymond Williams argued:

The clearing of parks as ‘Arcadian’ prospects depended on the completed system of exploitation of the agricultural and genuinely pastoral lands beyond the park boundaries. There, too, an order was being imposed: social and economic but also physical. The mathematical grids of the enclosure awards, with their straight hedges and straight roads, are contemporary with the natural curves and scatterings of the park scenery.³⁶

The making of the pastoral landscape in one place required the industrialization of the countryside in another. Pastoral landscapes thus required the active removal of workers – their displacement – even as their work remained necessary for retaining the desired pastoral view, as well as the advance of an industrialism to which it

²⁴ John Wylie, *Landscape*, London, 2007, 1; Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Eds), *The Iconography of Landscape*, Cambridge, 1988.

²⁵ Cosgrove, *Prospect, perspective*, 48, 49; Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape*, Madison, 1998 (1984); on property: Nicholas Blomely, *Landscape of property*, *Law and Society Review* 32 (1998) 567–612.

²⁶ Too little has been written about the relationship between landscape and alienation. For a start see Kenneth Olwig, *Representation and alienation in the political land-scape*, *Cultural Geographies* 12 (2005) 19–40.

²⁷ Gary Fields, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror*, Berkeley, 2017; Nicholas Blomely, *Making private property: enclosure, common right, and the work of hedges*, *Rural History* 18 (2007) 1–21. For the Swedish case, see Tomas Germundsson, *Landscape and modernity: contrasting impressions from estate domains in Scania*, in: T. Germundsson, K. Hansen, and K. Sundberg (Eds), *Modernisation and Tradition: European Local and Manorial Societies, 1500–1900* (Lund, 2004) 190–221; Tom Mels, *Primitive accumulation and the production of abstract space: nineteenth-century mire reclamation on Gotland*, *Antipode* 46 (2014) 1113–1133.

²⁸ Cosgrove and Daniels, *The Iconography of Landscape*; S. Daniels and S. Seymour, *Landscape design and the idea of improvement, 1730–1900*, in: R.A. Dodgson and R.A. Butlin (Eds), *An Historical Geography of England and Wales*, London, 1990, 487–520.

²⁹ See the essays collected in W.J.T. Mitchell (Ed) *The Power of Landscape*, Chicago, 1994.

³⁰ Cosgrove, *Social Formation*; Cosgrove, *The Palladian Landscape: Geographical Change and Its Cultural Representations in Sixteenth-Century Italy*, University Park, 1993; Kenneth Olwig, *Landscape, Nature, and the Body Politic: From Britain's Renaissance to America's New World*, Madison, 2002.

³¹ We here have emphasized the role of painting and mapping, but as Olwig shows, theater played at least as equally a decisive role, as the “scene” on stage shifted from being a model of the world outside to a model for the world outside. Olwig, *Meanings of Landscape and Landscape, Nature*. See also Yi-Fu Tuan, *Topophilia*, Englewood Cliffs, 1974, 133.

³² See especially chapter 5 of Olwig's *Landscape, Nature*.

³³ See Paul Cloke, *Rural landscapes*, in: N. Johnson, R. Schein, and J. Winders (Eds) *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Cultural Geography*, Oxford, 280–294.

³⁴ Cosgrove, *Social Formation*; on the global, imperialist conditions of possibility for such possession, see the chapter on Jane Austin's *Mansfield Park* in Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York, 1994.

³⁵ Cloke, *Rural landscapes*, 283. Similar forces were at work in Sweden, with a strong romantic movement developing in the 1810s and 1820s, but perhaps, given the centrality of the critique of industrialism, coming into fullest flower a century later. Robert W. Rix, *Introduction: romanticism in Scandinavia*, *European Romantic Review* 26 (2015), 295–400; H. Arnold Barton, *The silver age of Swedish national romanticism, 1905–1920*, *Scandinavian Studies* 74 (2002), 505–520.

³⁶ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 124.

was ostensibly opposed.³⁷ Pushed to the dark side, the back stage, or the industrializing quarters of the landscape, working people were increasingly excluded from the very places of beauty and pleasure they, through their labour, made and maintained.³⁸ Bucolic pleasure became the property – in all senses of that word – of the landed elite, even if it also trickled down into the ranks of the ascendant bourgeoisie.³⁹ The very ideals that undergird landscape as scenery, and as retreat or refuge from the clanging world of industrial capitalism, were made possible by the active exclusion of working people from the landscape as anything other than servants of that landscape.

This dynamic – of enclosure, alienation, and idealization – was hardly absent from the Swedish landscape, especially in Skåne, in the south, the very cradle of the *Folkets parker* movement. As Tomas Germundsson has shown with reference to the Skanian manor of Vittskövle:

Prevailing from pre-industrial time is the tendency to ‘naturalise’ the estate’s productive landscape and the work put in to it. The park, the well-arranged alleys, the thoroughly-cultivated fields, and the woods and grazing grounds assembled a landscape entity that only vaguely revealed any trace of how it was produced.

A kind of rural or pastoral idyll was constructed through a ‘combination of elements such as architectonic historicity and pastoral parks’ which allowed ‘the landscape to mediate a harmony between nature and culture based on ideology’. In essence, ‘the modernisation of the estates during the 19th and early 20th centuries’ – the era of the industrialization of the countryside – ‘was carried out with deliberate reference to earlier epochs, to a time when the power of an estate owner was of a more concentrated and despotic character ...’.⁴⁰ Pastoral landscape ideals in Sweden were not only elite ideals, but despotic ones.

Making the landscape, making the folk

‘Västerås’s People’s Park is a beautiful example of what purposeful work, energy, sacrifice and *belief in the future* can achieve. Out of about 22,000 square meters of rocky hills, marshes, thickets, and swampland has over the past thirty years one of Sweden’s most beautiful People’s Parks been created’.⁴¹

But not all Swedish landscapes were pastoral in this sense. For, modernizing Sweden also traded on (partially clashing) ideals of the ‘space of nature’ Paul Cloke refers to, though this nature is perhaps less bucolic and less tame, if idyllic nonetheless – as well as *scenic*. As Tom Mels details, the wild nature of mountains and forest came to be imagined, especially in conservative bourgeois circles, as ‘pictures’ through which Swedes of the late nineteenth-

century could ‘clearly imagine their ancestors’ country.’ in the words of the nineteenth century explorer and politician Baron Adolph Erik Nordenskiöld. To affirm ‘the organic oneness of nature and the people’ Nordenskiöld proposed that Sweden develop a set of national parks. As Sweden industrialized, Nordenskiöld and others proposed that such parks would offer ‘an ontology of national prehistory’ and allow for the transposition of ‘metaphysical longing for union with nature into the political doctrine of union with nation’. Through national parks, the bourgeois elite could construct ‘Swedishness’ as ‘a coherent, avowedly classless, ideological totality’.⁴²

This too was an alienating process. Not only were Sweden’s new national parks often carved out of land that formed traditional Saami territories, they were also specifically created as a salve in a world where ‘the abstract space of industrial society had pitched its tent “in a space in which the communitarian traditions of the countryside had been swept away”’, as Mels put it, quoting Lefebvre. The national parks ‘hardly expressed a working-class way of representing the world’, even as they were meant to represent how ‘the tenacious battle for existence against a hostile nature had fashioned the Swedish character’. By alienating land and setting it aside as parks, the wild Swedish nature that defined the Swedish folk could be preserved, even as Swedish working classes were finding themselves alienated from their own, defining, ‘communitarian traditions’. Through this double alienation the ‘nature and landscape’ of the Swedish national parks ‘could be embedded in a discourse of patriotism’ – a kind of nationalism, or at least national identity, that was commensurate with the new industrial society under construction.⁴³ That there exists such a link between landscape and national identity – the identity of a *folk* – is hardly controversial, even if, or perhaps especially when, the inordinate complexity of this link is acknowledged. For, indeed, the interesting question is always how this landscape and this identity become sites of struggle and are never merely imposed on a compliant folk.⁴⁴ As the historian of ideas Bosse Sundin wrote:

Industrialism appeared to cut down all ties with nature, the *hembygd* [home district] and the fatherland. Everywhere an ‘un-Swedish proletariat’ seemed to lurk that could throw society into a devastating class struggle It was deemed important to give the proletariat a feeling of homeliness. In those days, nature and the *hembygd* obtained a moral and fostering significance.⁴⁵

The development of the national parks sought to create what Mels identified as a ‘synecdochic nationalism’. Indeed, the very founding legislation for the national park system declared ‘that the aim of park establishment ... is to create an object for patriotism’, and it might be only an apparent coincidence that this legislation passed in the very year of Sweden’s biggest, and most significant, general strike, 1909. ‘Nationalism’, Mels concludes, ‘found its nexus in the

³⁷ Don Mitchell and Carlo Sica, Landscape and labour, in: M. Domosh, M. Hefernan, and C. Withers (Eds) *The Sage Handbook of Historical Geography* (Vol. 1), London, 2020.

³⁸ This is not merely a historical process – something that only happened “back then” – as James and Nancy Duncan showed in their excavations of the contemporary relations of production, and the production of meaning, in the elite suburban landscapes near New York City: *Landscapes of Privilege: The Politics of the Aesthetic in an American Suburb*, New York, 2004.

³⁹ See Robert Fishman, *Bourgeois Utopias: The Rise and Fall of Suburbia*, New York, 2008 (1987).

⁴⁰ Tomas Germundsson, The landscape of Vittskövle Estate: at the crossroads of feudalism and modernity, in: H. Palang, H. Sooväli, M. Antrop, and G. Setten (Eds), *European Rural Landscapes: Persistence and Change in a Globalising Environment*, Dordrecht, 2004, 257–258.

⁴¹ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 86, original emphasis.

⁴² Tom Mels, Nature, home, and scenery: the official spatialities of Swedish national parks, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20 (2002), 139, quoting A.E. Nordenskiöld, Förslag till inrättandet af Riksparker i de nordiska länderna, *Per Brahes Minne den 12 September 1680-1880*, Stockholm, 1880. As noted, this effort worked in tandem with efforts to define the folk through presumed regional custom. See note 10 above.

⁴³ Tom Mels, *Wild Landscapes: The Cultural Nature of Swedish National Parks*, Lund 1999, 42, 75, 85; 180; Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, Oxford, 1991, 275; Orvar Löfgren, *Känslans förvandling: tiden, naturen och hemmet i den borgliga kulturen*, in: J. Frykman and O. Löfgren (Eds), *Den Kultiverade Människan*, Stockholm, 1987, 21–127.

⁴⁴ David Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, London, 1998.

⁴⁵ Bosse Sundin, Upptäcken av hembygden: om konstruktionen av regional identitet, in: B. Blomberg and S.-O. Lindquist (Eds) Lund, 1994, 19; as translated and quoted in Mels, *Wild Landscapes*, 69; Crang, Nation, region, and homeland.

countryside, in the link between landscape, nature and inhabitants'.⁴⁶ Landscape, as Stephen Daniels has put it, 'articulate[s] national identities', and in the process becomes central in the forging of people into *the* people, into a *folk*.⁴⁷

In Sweden, this became a contested nationalism, however, and working people too could wield the tool of landscape. According to the historical ethnologist Mats Lindqvist, even before socialism took hold, nature was appropriated as 'a free space for the workers movement' outside and in opposition to the factory's world of 'oppression and unfreedom that marked the wage worker's situation, on and off the clock'. This cultural relationship to nature drew on older framings of landscape, but was also imbued with 'a collective character – the large groups on the march together on village roads or the tumult in the meadows – that made the workers' use of nature different from the bourgeoisie's'.⁴⁸ From within this workers' culture, socialists created institutions that sought to strategically make political use of nature as both a site where the notion of the people was molded into shape and a space for a working class leisure culture that met workers' longing for a world beyond work.

The most well-known example is perhaps the Young Eagles, a social democratic scouting association founded 1931, which posed a democratic notion of 'natural citizenship' against the dangers of what the left saw as authoritarian and conservative nationalism lurking in the landscape ideals and practices of Baden-Powell's official Scout Movement.⁴⁹ Similarly, working-class writers appropriated the pastoral trope in poetry and fiction about the rural poor and workers.⁵⁰ Even the most radical parts of the movement, like the early twentieth century Young Socialists (eventually severed from the social democratic family for venturing too close to revolutionary anarchist ideas), built their fictional worlds around the rural-urban distinction underpinning the pastoral landscape ideal. While agricultural rurality remained shot through with despotic exploitation in these representations, short stories and poems framed untouched nature as means to imagine an ideal world. As historian Emma Hilborn argues, fictionalized nature allowed the Young Socialists to 'come in touch with a utopia' which wasn't 'a distant land of the future but existed in parallel with the dark mills' of the dense cities.⁵¹

Yet perhaps even more important for appropriating the elite notion of landscape as a privileged site for constituting 'the people', was in the country's expanding network of *Folkets parker*. Despite a strong cultural emphasis in Swedish labor history since the 1980s, however, the hundreds of People's Parks that on weekend nights drew combined crowds numbering in the hundreds of thousands have barely been studied by historians.⁵² One reason is perhaps, as historian Stefan Nyzell writes, the dominant role of a decade-long debate in Swedish labor history which turned on a fascination with the tension between 'the ideal-typical concepts of

"respectability" and "unruliness".⁵³ While this dualism might have spoken to historians of the 1990s seeking the roots of the welfare state's disciplinary powers, narratives of a 'workers aristocracy' disciplining the broad masses in a dress rehearsal of later social engineering is hard to smoothly apply to the People's Parks, which (as one of the few studies that *does* exist makes clear) had to continually navigate between pressure to provide space for more "unruly" leisure like drinking and dancing and the movement's strategic ambitions to shape popular culture according to political designs.⁵⁴

This relative lack of interest in the People's Parks among historians, beyond the respectability-unruliness debate and a number of anniversary publications, is all the more surprising given the movement's own understanding of its ambitions at the height of the parks' power.⁵⁵ The parks were, as its central organization intoned in the very first words of its 1930 retrospective, 'unique in this world, for no other country has anything like it to show. And over this we can feel patriotic pride. ... A contributing factor' to the success of the movement and thus this sense of patriotic pride 'is perhaps also that our country's vegetation and structure has great advantages compared to other countries for such a movement. We have our beautiful oak hills and birch and fir groves which are particularly well-suited for People's Parks, even if in most cases it took immense work to get them in order' (Fig. 6). The 'immense work' required to turn advantageous nature into a landscape that would help forge a new Swedish identity was also designed to give the proletariat a sense of 'homeliness', but one more suited to its own interests than that being forged through the national park movement: 'from the beginning [the People's Parks movement] was to some degree politically colored'. But the goal was to assure the parks became places for 'all of society's classes' – 'people's parks in the full meaning of the word'.⁵⁶

In this, there are clear parallels between the parks' aims and how leading Social Democrats in the early-twentieth century sought to establish a unifying 'popular politics' that underlined a *Swedish* tradition of liberty, and explicitly elaborated on the relationship between class and people.⁵⁷ In light of the bourgeois project of nation-making and attempts to portray the proletariat as 'un-Swedish', the early-twentieth-century Social Democratic Workers Party was permeated by a desire to portray itself as fundamentally Swedish. As early as 1911, party board member Fabian Månsson proclaimed that 'the ideas that socialism advocate are not new, not foreign, they are ancient Swedish', while the 1924 party congress was introduced with the statement that 'it is our old Swedish incubation [*odling*], our country's culture and our entire history that has shown us the way'.⁵⁸ A decade later such continuity was further emphasized in election posters that depicted 'the Swedish People's path' as a stair where the Social Democratic party leader Hjalmar Branting stood above three well-known, and heavily mythologised figures, that the party now claimed as its

⁴⁶ Mels, *Wild Landscapes*, 70

⁴⁷ Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States*, Princeton, 1993, 7.

⁴⁸ Mats Lindqvist, *Klasskamrater: Om Industriellt Arbete och Kulturell Formation, 1880–1920*, Lund, 1987.

⁴⁹ Björn Lundberg, *Naturliga Medborgare: Friluftsliv och Medborgarfostran i Scoutrörelsen och Unga Örnar 1925–1960*, Lund, 2018.

⁵⁰ Lars Furuland, *Statarna i Litteraturen: En Studie i Svensk Dikt och Samhällsdebatt, 1880–1962*, Lund, 1962.

⁵¹ Emma Hilborn, *Världar i Brand: Fiktion, Politik och Romantik i det Tidiga 1900-talets Ungsocialistiska Press*, Lund, 2014.

⁵² Hilborn's work is a partial exception. In the fiction she analyzes, People's Parks were among the rural spaces that allowed the working class to escape the dreaded city. *Ibid.*, 168.

⁵³ Stefan Nyzell, *Arbetarkultur i brytningstid: reflektioner kring kulturhistorien, den nya kulturhistorien och historien bortom den nya kulturhistorien i den svenska arbetarhistoriska forskningen*, *Scandia* 73 (1) (2007), 80.

⁵⁴ Stefan Andersson, *Det Organiserade Folknöjet: En Studie Kring de Svenska Folkparkerna 1890–1930*, Lund, 1987; see also, Billig and Stigendal, *Hegemonins Decennier*.

⁵⁵ Margarita Ståhl, whose work is cited throughout this paper and is in general indispensable, has written the most thorough histories of the *Folkets hus* and *Folkets park* movement, though she more strongly emphasizes the houses than the parks. Her work has been largely the result of anniversary commissions.

⁵⁶ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 5, 6.

⁵⁷ See 'En stark folklig politik', 'Folk och klass' and 'Sverige åt svenskarna' in Per-Albin Hansson, *Demokrati: Samlade Tal och Uppsatser*, Stockholm, 1935.

⁵⁸ Åsa Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna Skriver Historia: Historiskrivning som Ideologisk Maktresurs 1892–2000*, Stockholm, 2001, 235, 283.

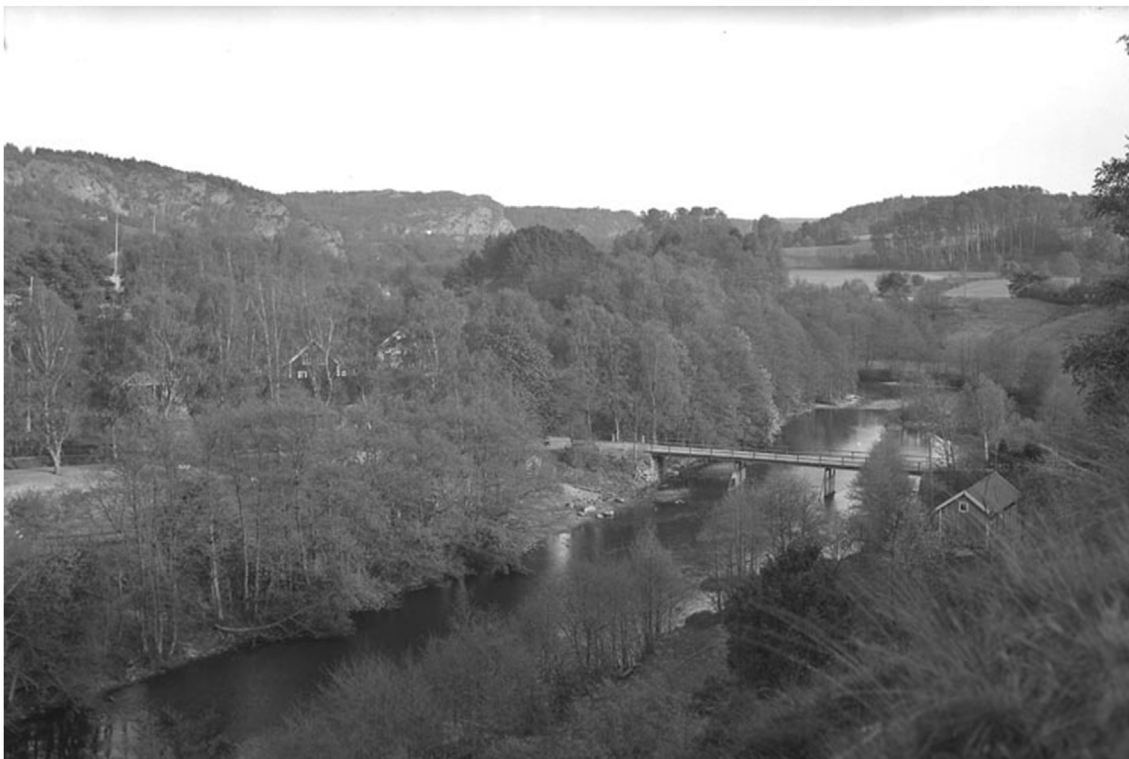


Fig. 6. Nestled in groves of birch and fir and abutting the hills, the People's Park in Munkdal is to the left in this picture taken in 1938. Photograph by Selma Sahlberg, Bohusläns museum (public domain).

forerunners (Fig. 7). In this sense, the appropriation of established bourgeois landscape ideals can be read as the correlate of a concurrent attempt to appropriate both historical-mythical figures and national identity in party pamphlets, posters, and speeches.

In Malmö – site of the first *Folkets park* to bear the name – the Social Democrats, working with a broad range of other actors from across the labour and socialist movements, first secretly rented, then used the proceeds from a small entry fee and selling coffee to purchase the extensive grounds of the Suell family estate in Möllevången (Fig. 8), which was then rapidly becoming part of the urban fabric, first covered by factories and shortly thereafter with working class housing.⁵⁹ Begun in 1806, and designed on international landscape principles then current, the estate grounds were developed by Frans Suell, a Dutch immigrant and early industrialist, who ‘generously opened [them] for all who wanted to stroll around and enjoy the greenery’. For much of the nineteenth century, the Suell estate was Malmö’s only ‘freely accessible park for the broad public’ (though contemporary paintings and drawing indicate it was a largely bourgeois public), and as such it also became a popular place for concerts and other entertainment.⁶⁰ When the working-class districts of Malmö encroached on the estate, the Suell family sold the park to a small time merchant who leased it to the Good Templars, who in turn rented and then engineered the sale of it to the Social Democrats in 1891–1892.⁶¹ The Social

Democrats inherited a fully mature landscape, with paths, ponds, copses, flower beds, follies, and pleasure houses (like Frans Suell’s small hunting lodge called ‘The Tower’, which served as the base for *Folkets park*’s first coffee house). This served as the foundation upon which the park was developed as restaurants, theaters, a small amusement park, and large picnic grounds were added. And for many contemporaries in the movement, it was just these features – both the bucolic landscape and the amenities – that made the park attractive to the movement, as this, perhaps overly enthusiastic, passage from 1910 indicates:

By the fast wings of rumor has it come to be known the world over how beautiful it is in *Folkets park*: flowerbeds, labyrinths, and lovely picnic shelters for families and the newly engaged alternate with each other. Four first-class restaurants serve treats for every taste, and music from the country’s best musicians offers to heighten the atmosphere (Fig. 9).⁶²

Yet neither Malmö’s People’s Park nor the other parks that followed in its train sought merely to recapitulate the bourgeois landscape ideal; they sought to remake it. *Folkets parker* were landscaped pleasure grounds, to be sure, but they also were, and were meant to be, meeting grounds.⁶³ Rather than a place of pastoral ease as distinct from a space of struggle and strife, places of pastoral ease could now become platforms for working class struggles. No longer need the rural idyll be self-evidently conservative.

Besides pleasurable, People’s Parks were political, and that was at least as much the case in parks built in rural areas as it was of the

⁵⁹ Arbetet och Malmö Museum, *Min Ungdoms Park*, Malmö, 1981; Axel Lundgren (Ed) *Malmö Folkets Park under dess Fyrtionde Säsong*, Malmö, 1930; Peter Billig, *Hundra År i Folkets Tjänst: Malmö Folkets Park, 1891–1991*, Malmö, 1991; Johan Pries and Erik Jönsson, *Remaking the People’s Park: heritage renewal troubled by past political struggles?* *Culture Unbound* 11 (2019), 78–103.

⁶⁰ Arbetet, *Ungdoms Park*, 8; K.A. Härje, *Nöjeslivet: några anteckningar*, in: G. Härleman (Ed) *Malmö: En Skildring i Ord och Bild av Stadens Utveckling och Nuvarande Tillstånd*. D. 2, Malmö, 1914, 436–480.

⁶¹ Lundgren, *Malmö Folkets Park*, 24–25; Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 19.

⁶² Quoted in Arbetet, *Ungdoms Park*, 36.

⁶³ See, e.g. Sara Berg and Margareta Ståhl, *Till Förman för Folkets Hus: Folkets Hus och Folkets Parker i Stockholms Län*, Stockholm, 2003, 27.



Fig. 7. A 1934 campaign poster for the Social Democratic Party depicting a pantheon of Swedish national heroes headed by Halmar Branting. Source: Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek.

parks built in proximity to expanding industrial towns and cities as in Nässjö and Malmö.⁶⁴ It was rare for the movement to inherit a park. At the same time, the labour movement was not yet wealthy enough to purchase prime urban real estate.⁶⁵ The location of *Folkets parker* on urban fringes and in rural areas, then, was not merely a function of a desire to remake the rural, pastoral idyll, but also partly determined by economic necessity. Simultaneously, though freedom of assembly was acknowledged in law from 1864, detailed municipal regulations often rendered cities off limits for political protests, especially left-leaning ones. During the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, urban fringes became central places for those socialist agitators and movements barred from urban public space.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ The precedent for parks and pleasure grounds near rural, but industrial towns and villages dates to at least 1796, when, under the influence of incipient paternalist ideals, the industrialist Detlof Heijkenskiöld built the country's first rural *volkspark*, the landscape park of Krosbornsparken, for the workers of *Hällesfors bruk*, north of Örebro. For a brief description (that elides an industrialist-built park with a *folk park*), see: <https://www.lansstyrelsen.se/orebro/besoksmal/kulturmiljoer/krosbornsparken.html> (accessed, October 20, 2020).

⁶⁵ Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 27–30.

⁶⁶ Magnus Olofsson, *Frihet med förhinder: demonstrationer i Sverige 1849–1921*, in: U. Holgersson and L. Wägnerud (Eds), *Rösträttens århundrade*, Göteborg, 2018, 65–84.

Typically, then, the parks were created out of 'raw nature', as was the case in Nässjö, as well as in Eskilstuna, near Lake Malaren and some 270 km to the north, where in 1898 local labour unions created a park company to purchase land and oversee the development of the first People's Park outside Scania. 'Many suggestions were received' and the planning committee was led to understand that 'the future People's Park should be bestowed with a beautiful nature, be sunny and salubrious. The goal should be to create a well-situated getaway in nature for rest and rejuvenation, pleasure and amusement for the city's workers and their families during the times and days when the factories and workshops are closed'. The land the company eventually purchased 'was already ... a beloved Sunday haunt: the hundred-year-old oaks, the hilly terrain, the beautiful evergreen forest on the crest and the bushy broadleaf forest down below – all this was, despite the rocky [*stenbunden*] land, a lovely sight to behold. And even more lovely would the park become after a thorough round of cultivation'. But here is where the difficulty lay, for 'it was truly no easy thing for poor workers to realize [their dream] no matter how longed-for a People's Park really was. Yet solidarity would show in time what it was capable of'.⁶⁷

Here, then, two landscape ideals were blended: the first that of landscape as scenic, bucolic, and a retreat from the hurly-burly of industrial life; the second that of an older, more specifically Scandinavian tradition of landscape as commonly shaped ground – 'an area carved out by ax and plough', as Kenneth Olwig has put it, 'which belongs to the people who have carved it'.⁶⁸ This sense of belonging, or common ownership, is palpable in accounts of the development of the *Folkets parker* movement and central to how workers and activists saw the parks contributing to the shaping of a *folk*, rooted in a working class identity. Landscape is in this sense a commons, and one that is constructed through common labour, 'freely given', in the words of the Nässjö park's architects (Fig. 10). Or, as the Eskilstuna park's founders put it after noting the need for a thorough round of cultivating work: 'So began the strenuous evening, night, and Sunday work, naturally without real pay, [except] sometimes being offered some *sill* [pickled herring] and potatoes and a soft drink'.⁶⁹

Driven by the need to create a space for politics and meeting as well as a desire for a place for recreation developed on their own terms, working people in Nässjö, Eskilstuna, and similar towns and cities up and down the country engaged in the common, collective work of creating a landscape. In contrast to the national parks, which expected to build a folk through the contemplation of, and sometimes immersion in, a putatively wild landscape, in the *Folkets parker* working people would contribute to the development of a collective identity – and a transformed notion of "Swedishness" – through their collective labour. In just this sense the *Folkets parker* were a working country, of a kind Raymond Williams feared landscapes rarely were. The development of *Folkets parker* thus represented a significant expropriation and evolution in the landscape ideal, from an erasure of the evidence of work to an instantiation of it. For many in the social democratic movement during the first part of the twentieth century, including members of Nässjö's Social Democratic Youth Club, the need for working people to build their own parks was every bit as apparent as was the need to build their own cooperative companies, if they were ever to escape the exploitative world that 'private capital' made.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 46, 47.

⁶⁸ Kenneth Olwig, 'Sexual cosmology: nation and landscape at the conceptual interstices of nature and culture, or: what does landscape really mean?' in B. Bender (Ed), *Landscape: Politics and Perspectives*, Oxford, 1993, 311.

⁶⁹ FPC, *Folkets parkers centralorganisation*, 68, 47.

⁷⁰ Klubbmötesprotokoll, 19 April 1922, quoted in Kenneth Berggren, *En Socialdemokratiska Ungdomsklubbs Historia i Nässjö, 1906–1978*, Nässjö, 1978, 15.



Fig. 8. The old Suell estate, now Malmö's Folkets park in 1903. The view is along an old swan pond. Photograph by Gunnar Dahlgren, Malmö museer (cc by-nc).



Fig. 9. View towards the Moorish Pavilion in Malmö's People's Park c. 1920. Photograph by Berndt Johnsson, Malmö museer (cc by-nc).

And *parks* they needed to be. It was not only Eskilstuna's landscape that was characterized by a rocky terrain. This was a common characteristic of many People's Parks north of the southern Skåne region. The challenge, thus, was to create both a park-like landscape and a landscape that 'accords with what already exists, cares for and completes it'. In a series of three articles in the Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation's magazine *Folkparken* in 1924, C. F. Thelander,

the long-serving superintendent of Västerås's People's Park, offered detailed advice on how to achieve this balance between 'completing' what nature already provided and creating a park-like setting similar to those achieved in the more easily pastoral setting of Skåne. Too many times had Thelander seen enthusiastic park builders clear everything out 'and then plant anew'. Instead workers should be mindful of 'the rules of art' and seek to not create



Fig. 10. Voluntary work crew in an unknown park. Photographer unknown, Folkets Husföreningarnas Riksorganisation (public domain).

more than ‘a well-cared-for natural park, where the work of nature and the work of art complement each other’. It was therefore important to not ‘dynamite and break up more stone and rock than absolutely necessary’ and to ‘clear and thin carefully at the beginning’.⁷¹ The overriding rule was to ‘follow nature’s and the terrain’s instructions. If the place is heavily forested, rough, and stony, then make a natural park, that is to say, retain the area’s characteristics and exploit them. If, however, it is empty and as flat as a field then do not try to make an idyllic landscape but turn boldly in the other direction and create rectilinear figures’. Even so, these were *parks* and to be worthy of the name they had to become ‘place[s] with plantings of trees, bushes, and flowers, as well as lawns and waking paths’.⁷² To that end, Thelander published extensive lists of plants that would allow the parks to be in flower ‘from early spring to late autumn’ as well as specific instructions on how to lay out the flower beds for maximum effect.⁷³

Thelander’s advice was no doubt based on a deep botanical knowledge, but it was also based on a great deal of experience, experimentation, and the sharing of successes and failures among park builders from around the country. Such sharing was vital not only for shaping (and maintaining) the physical landscape – the nature and art of the overall park space – but also for the buildings and structures that gained increasing importance as the parks became central venues not only of retreat, but also entertainment and recreation: the coffee houses and restaurants, dance floors and stages, theaters and auditoriums that were an essential part of the *Folkets parker*’s success during the twentieth century. Few parks inherited ready-made structures, and those that did, like Malmö’s

People’s Park soon found a need for new or bigger ones. Almost always the first structure to be constructed was a dance floor, usually simply a ‘home-built plank floor’, which later might have a roof constructed over it (Fig. 11).⁷⁴ (In Nässjö, this desire for dance did not always meet with the approval of the members of the social democratic youth club, especially when it was coupled with the growing popularity of jazz in the 1920s. After extensive debate, the club decided in 1925 to not allow dance or jazz at its parties, some held in the *Folket park*. Within the year, however, it was forced to debate the question: ‘Why do our parties always fail?’⁷⁵) Next came outdoor theater stages. One of Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation’s earliest activities was to draw up and distribute plans for simply constructed stages. Only gradually were roofs built over the stages and eventually the seating, often as a result of members from a park’s association embarking on study tours of nearby parks to get design and construction ideas.⁷⁶

Like the work of cutting trees, moving stones, and making paths, park building construction was typically a collective affair in the early decades of park development and central to binding local working-class collectives to the landscapes they were making. In Alingsås it took only five weeks after the park land was purchased in 1915 for work crews to clear enough brush, move enough stones, and hammer together a dancefloor (‘without roof’) for the *Folkets park* to be inaugurated before a crowd of 700. Ten years earlier in Arboga two months of stone-clearing, bush-whacking, felling trees, and milling them – two months of workers contributing with ‘life and lust in the work’ – led to landscaped grounds and a ‘provisional

⁷⁴ Lundgren, *Malmö Folkets Park*; Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 205.

⁷⁵ Berggren, *Socialdemokratisk Ungdomsklubbs*, 17.

⁷⁶ Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 209–211. As noted, there is a tight connection between the production of landscape, the stage, and the production of plays, and the *Folkets parker* were obviously no exception. See Olwig, *The Meanings of Landscape*.

⁷¹ C.F. Thelander, Blommer och grönt i våra parker (part 1), *Folkparken* (1924, #3), 2.

⁷² Thelander, Blommer och grönt i våra parker (Part 3), *Folkparken* (1924, #5), 2, 1.

⁷³ Thelander, Blommer och grönt i våra parker (Part 2), *Folkparken* (1924, #4), 2–3.



Fig. 11. A typical, unimproved dance floor, Uddevala's *Folkets park*, 1929. Photography by David Almquist, Bohusläns museum (public domain).

theater' being opened to the public in early July. And over the course of the 1899 summer in Thelander's Västerås an 'enthusiastic' crowd of labourers gathered every evening after their shifts to undertake the 'magnificent work' of breaking and hauling stones, tearing out bushes (carefully), and constructing a large, if 'primitive' dancefloor, outside serving areas, and a stage, with much of the work more improvised than planned.⁷⁷ Thus did the construction of landscape simultaneously construct what the *Folkets hus* and *Folkets park*'s foremost historian, Margareta Ståhl, calls a 'workers' and popular culture'.⁷⁸

The People's landscape

'From the earliest days our People's Parks were mainly intended to be a refuge and recreation place for the working people, where after the day's hard work they could find rest and amusement. Gradually, the People's Park movement's task of promoting culture – of improving and refining the field of pleasure – won understanding and sympathy of people from all walks of society'.⁷⁹

Unlike the classless dream of unity encapsulated in Sweden's national park and cultural heritage movements, the *Folkets parker* movement was rooted in class and in a project geared towards constructing class consciousness. The parks were landscapes in which working class could serve as the foundation for national identity, as the foundation of the *folk*. As such, in the early years, the movement, and the parks themselves, were often greeted with hostility and derision by elite sectors of society.⁸⁰ Partially in

response to this hostility, park associations and park activists worked hard to attract as broad a public as possible through the park gates. At the same time that the Social Democratic party strove to portray themselves as a people's party rather than as a labour party, the People's Parks strove, in Ståhl's words, to transform the parks 'from a workers' park to a people's park' and to transform the 'workers' and folkish culture into the whole society's affair'.⁸¹ Doing so entailed further transformations in the landscape, and especially of the means of producing it.

The *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation* was founded in 1905 and in retrospectives written on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary park activists seem most proud of two main things: the spirit of collective, often improvisatory labour that transformed raw nature into idyllic landscapes and the way the parks quickly became cultural centers that promoted music (from popular to opera), dance (from social to ballet), theater and film. They quickly became the central meeting ground for youth groups and hobbyists of all sorts.

In Nässjö in 1925, *Folkets park* hosted the first exhibition and tournament of the newly founded working-class gymnastics club (in which some of the 'most sturdy boys' served as living pommel horses and other equipment), and nine years later hosted a visiting club from Örebro in a duel exhibition with the local youth.⁸² The 1920s were a time of great growth and evolution in the Nässjö park. After a big industrial exhibition closed its doors in the town in 1922, the park association purchased the restaurant that had been built for the occasion and moved it to the park, allowing for the hosting of parties all year round and not just in the summer months. Since the restaurant was equipped with a 'provisional' stage, it could also host plays, concerts, and dances in the winter. Proceeds from the

⁷⁷ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 33, 35, 68.

⁷⁸ Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 299.

⁷⁹ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 67.

⁸⁰ For two descriptions of such hostility, see *ibid*, 70, 83.

⁸¹ Ståhl, *Möte och Människor*, 299; Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna Skriver Historia*, 460.

⁸² Anon., *Nässjö Arbetares Gymnastikklubb, 1924–1944*, Jönköping, 1944, 37.



Fig. 12. Evening view of the *Folkets park* in Bergeforsen. Parks were illuminated beginning in the 1910s. Photographer unknown, Sundsvalls museum (public domain).

restaurant and these kinds of events allowed the park association to build a new, larger, and covered dance floor, which in turn, helped win ‘the understanding and sympathy of people from all walks of society’.⁸³

Around the country, *Folkets parker* were electrified in the 1910s (Fig. 12), and with the addition of new theaters and restaurants over the ensuing decades they increasingly became year-round venues (even if the summer months were always the most important). The increasing sophistication of the park installations, however, required park managers to invest in increasingly sophisticated sound and lighting equipment as well as film projection equipment (by the 1950s, some 567 cinemas could be found in the People’s Parks and collectively the parks associations were the largest owner and distributor of films in the country).⁸⁴ Such investments meant that *Folkets parker* often held the best venues in town for traveling musicians, theater companies, and other entertainers. In small towns they were often the only venue. The parks became key nodes in a developing circuit for performers of many stripes, from circus acts to comical troupes, from dance bands to star singers, and from popular lecturers to painters and other artists organized in traveling exhibitions. There was, to be sure, a deep tension that marked the People’s Park movement between those who desired popular entertainment and those who strove to create a more refined working-class culture marked by ‘an orientation towards life that provide[s] steadiness and morality, independent of external imperatives and decrees, whether these come from school, church, or company’.⁸⁵ Plays by Strindberg and Ibsen and operas by Mozart and Rossini alternated with visits by jugglers and vaudeville shows as well as sing-alongs featuring everything from the *Internationale* (in the early years, especially) to the latest pop hits.

What tied all these together was the way the park did not just attract an audience, but actively created it. In this regard the parks

assumed a similar function to the Popular Front-era cultural movements in Europe and America during the 1930s describe by Michael Denning, only at an earlier stage of the socialist movement.⁸⁶ Just as with the nature and art of the idyllic landscape of lawns and copses, trails and streams, the vigorous cultural programming worked to create a folk rooted in (an evolving) working class culture. In making the landscape while promoting art as well as pleasure, the *Folkets parker* were clear evidence that, in competition with the temperance movement and non-conformist Christians, the social-democratic workers’ movement was thus aspiring to be one of the three popular ‘folk movements’ (*folk-rörelser*) of the time. In this project, the parks played a double role: both claiming nature as the space of true folkish tradition and attempting to ‘seize the means of recreation’ and remake an emerging modern popular entertainment culture so as to align ‘the people’ with the movements’ priorities.⁸⁷

Such a double role necessarily required the parks movement not just to seize, but to actively *construct* the means of recreation. From their earliest days, when stages, outdoor theaters, and dancefloors were among the first constructions, through their constant upgrading (new roofs, new sound systems, whole new theaters and restaurants) in the first quarter of the twentieth century, the built landscape of the *Folkets parker* was as vital to remaking ‘the people’, as was shaping the ‘natural’ landscape. Indeed, the blending of the bucolic with the modern, the rustic with the technologically sophisticated, became something of a foundational ideal for the broader *folkhem* (people’s home) notion that became the leitmotif of the Social Democrats’ ascendance to power, and for which People’s Parks were vital cultural testbeds.

And, in fact, such a blending was remarkably successful, especially in broadening the appeal of *Folkets parker* beyond their original constituency to draw in other classes, not only in Nässjö, but up and down the length of the country. As the Eskilstuna newspaper *Folket* wrote in 1938:

⁸³ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 68, 67.

⁸⁴ Håkan Bengtsson, *Efterord: historiens eko*, in: Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 311.

⁸⁵ Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Den Skötsamme Arbetaren: Idéer och Ideal i ett Nörrländskt Sägerverkssamhälle, 1880–1930*, Stockholm, 2017, quoted in Bengtsson, “Efterord,” 304.

⁸⁶ Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century*, New York, 1998.

⁸⁷ Pries et al., *Parks and houses*.



Fig. 13. The People's Park in Sandviken around 1960. By this time many parks, like this one, were professionally landscaped and featured state-of-the-art theaters (middle ground), architecturally-designed restaurants, and improved dance floors (back ground). Photograph by Heed, Länsmuseum Gävleborg (cc by-SA).

From having been the workers' special pleasure park, it [*Folkets park*] now appears as the gathering place for the most different classes. To the same degree as the quality on offer has grown, so has the quantity [of visitors] increased. Now company owners and workers, bank directors and janitors sit side by side on the *Folkets park's* benches. Through *Folkets park* the different social classes have come nearer to each other. *Folkets park* has raised the workers own claim on life's holy fare [*andliga kost*] while at the same time it cleared and plowed the social swamps. It makes a tremendous contribution to our social lives.⁸⁸

Such encomiums to the parks were hardly rare – even in the bourgeois press – as the parks became an established part of nearly every municipality in the country, and as their role in producing and promoting culture as well as pleasure took on a central importance in building the new Swedish welfare state.

Yet as the parks' popularity increased, as they became less an oppositional space, place, and landscape and moved into the center of the new dispensation of power in Sweden, and as the desire for greater technological sophistication as well as a sense of permanence in the built endowment of the parks grew, the park associations that owned them increasingly turned away from using the kind of collective, voluntary labour that had been vital to making them into workers' landscapes (which was so vital in the production of workers' own culture and identity) and toward employing specialist architecture, building, and landscaping firms (Fig. 13). 'A market for People's Park builders [*folkparksbyggnader*] had grown

up', and even within particular firms, individuals specialized in *Folkets park* work, such as Ville Tommos, a light and sound engineer for the KF architectural firm, who was in high demand as theaters were built or improved. Tommos's KF colleague, the landscape architect Ulla Bodorff, 'guided the choice of flowers, trees, and bushes as well as fences' and drew up standardized general plans for the parks. She also promoted the development of swimming and camping areas, encouraging the further development of *Folkets parker* as 'free time and recreation-parks'. In 1943, the *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation* developed its own architectural bureau (*FPC Folkparkernas Arkitektbyrå*), that, despite having no permanent employees, assumed the task of coordinating the work of specialists and specialist firms around the country.⁸⁹

Both the in-house architectural bureau and the KF architects had strong connections to the labour movement.⁹⁰ But nonetheless, the shift implied in the relation between the parks and the people that this professionalization of landscape production – both built and natural – should not be underestimated. From a place of collective labour as well as a retreat from the exploitative conditions that marked industrializing capitalism in Sweden, by World War II the People's Parks had primarily become spaces only for the latter,

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁹⁰ The KF architectural firm had been created by the Swedish Cooperative Union in 1924, and was probably Sweden's largest architectural firm from the 1930s to at least the late 1950s. Like the Cooperative Union (*Kooperativa förbundet*) overall, it was independent from the Social Democratic party. There were nonetheless strong connections between Social Democrats and those leading the Cooperative Union. Lisa Brunnström, *Det Svenska Folkhemsbygget: Om Kooperativa Förbundets Arkitektkontor*, Stockholm, 2004.

⁸⁸ Quoted in Ståhl, *Möten och Människor*, 47–48.



Fig. 14. An audience scattered around the bird pond listening to a concert in Huskvarna's *Folkets park*, late 1950s. Photography by Conny Rich, Jönköpings läns museum (CC BY).

especially as such retreats were vital to the growing recognition of the need for individuals in industrial society to have access to space for *friluftsliv*.⁹¹ Professionalization signaled the end to the more active, movement phase in the construction of the *folk* and the rise of a more passive phase in which the *folk* was *primarily* an audience – or to use the Swedish word, a *publik*. There is no doubt, however, that in the post-war years in particular – that is, during the era of the *folkhem*'s greatest success – this was a highly receptive and enthusiastic public. Indeed, by the end of the 1950s, annual attendance in Nässjö's *Folkets park* almost reached four times the town's total population.⁹² People came to watch touring companies present 'three to four operas, four reviews, one to two variety shows with whole-afternoon programs and six to seven plays', frequently starring some of the biggest names of the day.⁹³ And they came to picnic, to stroll through the grounds, to buy an ice cream, beer, or dinner, to listen to music, and to dance. But less and less did they come to build. A different set of landscape ideals now drove park development and use. Built as landscapes within which a people could be forged, by the dawn of the 1960s, *Folkets parker* had become public spaces within which precisely that people could

now be entertained (Fig. 14), and which now again stood as something like the opposite of a 'working country'.

Conclusion: power materialized – and dissipated

'Our People's Parks are in their own way a monument to the best qualities of the Swedish working class'.⁹⁴

Another way to understand the landscape is as 'power materialized'.⁹⁵ The People's Parks are evidence of the Swedish working-class and democratic-socialist movement's power to shape both the land and the *folk*, while also seizing and constructing the 'means of recreation'. By adopting and reworking older, often elite or bourgeois, landscape ideals – the rural idyll, the pastoral, rustic retreat – as well as the ideal of a substantive, shaped, 'carved out' landscape that was the people's own, *Folkets parker* made these movements' power manifest on the ground. Thus they provided a vital, material base – both a space and a place – from which the Social Democratic Party could widen, deepen, and assert its power as it took control of the reins of the state and set to work building up a new society. As the Party solidified its own hold on

⁹¹ In 1938 workers won the right to two weeks paid holiday each year; in 1951 and 1963 this was increased to three and four weeks respectively; and in 1977 to five.

⁹² Grahnat, 94-årig folkpark.

⁹³ Rydén, *Nässjö under Järnvägsepoken*, 233.

⁹⁴ FPC, *Folkets Parkers Centralorganisation*, 68.

⁹⁵ Don Mitchell, *They Saved the Crops: Labor, Landscape, and the Struggle Over Industrial Farming in Bracero-Era California*, Athens, GA, 2012, 397–399.

governmental power, it engaged in a thoroughgoing transformation of the broader Swedish landscape, investing heavily in urban and regional planning, the mass-construction of housing, the nationalization and extension of transportation infrastructure, and the broader provisioning of green space – the space for *friluftsliv* – than the People's Park movement ever could. In the process, *Folkets parker* up and down the land became enrolled as only one node in 'a system of parks and recreation areas', as the standard engineering and architecture textbook on social planning put it in 1962 – a system that provided for the enjoyment, pleasure, and health of the public in Sweden's growing cities and towns.⁹⁶

Not unlike in the People's Parks themselves the construction of the Swedish welfare state, and its landscape, had entered a non-movement phase by the middle of the twentieth century. And one of the central, though perhaps not unintended ironies of this shift was that this new landscape, though rooted strongly in an ethos of solidarity and equality, also provided the material basis for promoting the wealth and well-being of the individual as it did the forging of a *folk*. By the postwar period social democracy had increasingly come to see the state as both a way to build the collective power to enable socialism and create strong, independent, and healthy individuals ready to be the citizens of this future society.⁹⁷ The crowning achievement of the Swedish experiment in social democracy – not only the extensive tracts of housing with interwoven parks and green spaces, but also shifts in law allowing for greater independence of women, young people, and the elderly – was, perhaps, its creation (at least for a time) of the material conditions in which the *individual* could thrive. Under such circumstances, with the state taking on an ever-growing role in planning and provisioning for the social reproduction of the people,⁹⁸ and with a folkish or popular culture now to a decent degree fully constructed, the People's Parks lost much of their *raison d'être*. With the shifts in patterns of entertainment made possible by TV, with extensive paid vacation and the growing ability for working-class people to travel to the Alps or Portugal – and also to the Swedish national parks that grew concomitantly with the *Folkets parker* – for recreation, attendance in many People's Parks declined

and the workers' associations that owned them lost much of their financial and other support from the very people they were meant to serve. In some places, like Malmö, the People's Park came under sustained attack in the 1980s from right-wing politicians both seeking to erase what remained of a powerful working-class landscape (which served as a reminder of the power of the working class) and wanting to seize its assets – from land to entertainment facilities – and put them to more 'entrepreneurial' use,⁹⁹ that is, to construct a landscape more appropriate to the making of Swedish *persons* than the making of a Swedish people.¹⁰⁰

In Nässjö, after the park association sold out to the city which then sent in the wrecking crews in 2011, it was not until 2016 that ground was broken on the first new houses in *Bostadsområdet Folkets Park*. Five years of wrangling with builders over the detailed development plan, a fair degree of bad blood between city officials and construction companies, and shifting fortunes within the national housing and credit markets finally resulted in ground being broken on the first houses in the district – along what was to be the future Theater Street (a name that, in fact, does not exist on any current maps of the area, though there is a *Folkets park* Street).¹⁰¹

The collective power materialized in the *Folkets park* landscape in Nässjö is now completely dissipated, as a new landscape, representing a new constellation of forces and a different set of ideals is under construction. 'Social and technological changes to the land, the manipulation of valleys and basins ... and wetlands to provide sustenance, shelter and defence',¹⁰² are all still very much underway in Nässjö, only now they are serving to produce a different kind of *folk* and not necessarily one rooted in a movement, much less aiming to produce a working-class culture that would serve as a foundation for a new national identity.

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⁹⁶ Lars Forsby (Ed) *Handboken BYGG*, Vol. 7–8, Stockholm, 1962, 853:5.

⁹⁷ Lars Trägårdh. *Är Svensken Människa? Gemenskap och Oberoende i det Moderna Sverige*, Stockholm, 2015.

⁹⁸ During the 1950s and 1960s, the Swedish Social Democratic government not only sought to supplement and sometimes replace the People's Parks with other green spaces, it also sought to replace many of the country's People's Houses (*Folkets hus*) with less class-rooted and politically-based Citizens' Houses (*Medborgarhus*). See, e.g., Bengtsson, *Efterord*, 306–307.

⁹⁹ Pries and Jönsson, *Remaking People's Park*.

¹⁰⁰ In a demographically rapidly changing Sweden, these are charged issues, especially as the right-wing nationalist-populist party, the Sweden Democrats, has appointed itself the guardian of the Swedish *folk* against all incomers. Our point in this paper has not been to interrogate how the imagined *folk* of the *folkhem* and *Folkets parker* could all too easily lend itself to such nationalist and racist tendencies – that is a project for another paper – but rather to examine the material foundations that made the construction of a *folk* imaginable in the first place.

¹⁰¹ Första huset i Folkets Park byggs upp, *Smålands Dagblad*, 7 May 2016; Jan-Olov Persson, *Gamla Folkets Park får Teatergata, Värnamo Nyheter*, 21 April 2015.

¹⁰² Wall and Waterman, *Introduction*, 1.