



# A Critical Ethnography of Political Activism: Challenges Arising from Practical, Emotional and Theoretical Closeness to the Field

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**ABSTRACT** This article presents a reflective account of the research process related to my long-term ethnographic fieldwork on activism in Malmö—an important site of pro-migrant and anti-racist activism in Sweden—between 2013 and 2016. Employing ethnographic methods in the field of political activism raises questions about positionality, impact, possible overidentification with the people or groups studied, and distinctions between theory and action and epistemology. Being an insider to the field geographically (as a resident of the city and neighbourhood in focus) and ideologically (leftist politics), was highly advantageous for gaining access to the field and in building trust and close communication with radical activists. At the same time, my closeness raised challenges. Examples discussed in the article are related to the academic-activist relationship with a specific focus on negotiating positions in the field, and the ethical concerns related to studying a politically charged field. These reflections aim to offer transparency in terms of the impact these aspects' have had on my research, while at the same time being aware of the limitations of reflexivity.

**Keywords:** activist ethnography; activist-academic relationship; emotions; insider position; reflexivity

## Introduction

This article presents a reflective account of the research process related to my long-term ethnographic fieldwork on activism as a PhD student in Malmö, Sweden, between 2013 and 2016. I engaged in fieldwork as an “insider” in two respects: in terms of my history in relation to Möllevången and Malmö, where I had lived for ten years, and in relation to the leftist, extra-parliamentarian activist scene in the city that I had, to some extent, become a part of. These reflections aim to offer transparency in terms of the impact these aspects have had on my research results. The long-term ethnographic fieldwork I conducted generated close social relationships and I believe it was possible to sustain friendships and acquaintances that both constituted and transcended my fieldwork engagements without jeopardising the quality of the research.

Karl Marx (1843) described shame as a revolutionary emotion, an emotion that leads one to do good. In the same way, during my fieldwork I learnt that in ethnographic method and writing emotions play a critical role in helping us analyse lived experiences of all those involved in the research process. Emotions in general and anxiety and insecurity in particular can contribute to an in-depth and ethically responsible account of our experiences and the people we have met along the way. An emotional engagement with the topic of research contributes to critical thinking and ethical decision making while at the same time requiring

more reflexivity and transparency on the part of the researcher. Reflexivity is important for all forms of research. It refers to the ways in which the outcomes of research are affected by the people and processes involved, which naturally includes the researcher. Moral and ethical decisions arise at all stages of the research process, from the selection of the research topic to the final writing-up and presentation of the results (Akeroyd 1984: 137). Reflexivity is nevertheless particularly central to the practice of ethnographic research. The relationship between the researcher and the participants is long-term and more intimate, especially in ethnographic research.

Employing ethnographic methods in the field of political activism raises additional questions about positionality, impact, possible overidentification with the people or groups studied, and distinctions between theory, action, and epistemology. The boundaries between research, advocacy, and everyday life were blurred when I became involved in the social setting of the activist groups (Davis 2003; Petray 2012). Since my sympathies lie with the activists – some of whom I lived with, were my neighbours, or were people I met on the “barricades” – I make special effort in this article to reflect on the relations between research and activism and my role as a researcher.

Having said this, I want to clarify that I don’t think we can “escape from the consequences of our positions by talking about them endlessly” (Patai 1994: 70). Self-reflexivity does not produce better research per se but is dependent on how we go about talking about our positions: “how we practice reflexivity, how these practices impact, open up, or limit the possibilities for critical representations” (Pillow 2003: 177). Pillow (2003) argues for “reflexivities of discomfort”: a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous, which I have tried to highlight in this article.

The argument I make here is that my position as a partial insider enabled easy access to the field and close communication with radical activists, and my partial outsider position enabled critical examination on the social processes being studied. Two examples of such critical examinations are the boundary-making and hierarchies between different activist groups in the city and the activist scene’s contribution to the gentrification of the neighbourhood. My emotional engagement throughout the fieldwork repeatedly forced me to reflect on my study’s possible implications for activists, and the impact my close relations with some of the activists might have on my research results.

In the following sections, I present the research project followed by a detailed description of the methods that I applied. I then offer a reflective discussion on the challenges I encountered resulting from my practical, emotional, and theoretical closeness to the field. In the concluding section, I summarise the main points of the article and lessons learnt from the challenges of conducting an ethnography of political activism.

### **Presentation of Research Project**

The research project<sup>1</sup> (completed in 2019) was theoretically founded in the intersection of migration studies, urban studies, and social movement studies. I examined the interactions between place, power, and resistance by describing and analysing the activism carried out by left-wing, extra-parliamentarian activists in Malmö from 2013 to 2016. The aim was to analyse how solidarity was created and enacted and the impacts the activists had on 1) the

<sup>1</sup> The study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund (Etikprövningsnämnden Lund) on 4 March 2015 (with registration number DNR 2014/782). Matters concerning anonymity and potential harm to the participants have been carefully considered in this study.

place (Malmö/Möllevången) and 2) social relations (between activists as well as between activists and non-activists). Solidarity here means a relationship forged between actors in unequal power relations that aims towards a more equal order. Particular attention was paid to how activism enabled social relationships and even close friendships across the divides of class, ethnicity, legal status, and gender and between Swedish citizens and people with a precarious legal status, such as undocumented migrants or Roma migrants who hold citizenship in another European country.

Activism in Malmö included Swedish citizens, some of whom were born abroad or have foreign backgrounds, as well as people with experiences of forced migration living in precarious conditions in Malmö. The “activist lens” (Hansen 2019) thus enabled me to capture a broad range of their experiences and move “away from treating the migrant population as the unit of analysis and investigation and instead direct the focus on parts of the whole population, which obviously includes migrants” (Dahinden 2016: 2217).

The research project thus included the experiences and views of people in relative positions of power (economic, cultural, legal, and social) who inhabit the same city that was founded on the exploitation of the many by the few (Harvey 1976). The precarity effected by neoliberalism is not confined to those at the bottom of the class structure, since the antagonism between capital and labour is no longer concentrated in specific places of work, but traverses the whole of society (Tyler 2015). I demonstrated how activist sociabilities in Malmö, established by people who, despite their differences, constructed locally embedded solidarities and shared experiences and narratives, enabled the transformation of dispossession into political struggles against the growing disparities and displacements of global capitalism.

During the time of my fieldwork, I specifically focused on the actions carried out by five different activist groups, selected for their prominent presence in Malmö: *Aktion mot deportation* (Action Against Deportation); *Allt åt alla* (Everything for Everyone); *Asylgruppen* (The Asylum Group); *Kontrapunkt* (Counterpoint, a social centre); and *Skåne mot rasism* (Scania Against Racism)<sup>2</sup>. Most of the activists connected to these groups had middle-class backgrounds and experiences of attending university. Their activism concerned migrants’ and asylum seekers’ rights, anti-deportation, anti-racism, anti-fascism, and ‘right-to-the-city’ struggles (e.g. against gentrification and welfare retrenchment), which they addressed with strategies ranging from solidarity-based work and advocacy to more radical forms of direct action like blockades and sit-ins. These different strands of struggles were interrelated not only through the individuals and groups of activists who participated and built alliances across these struggles, but also structurally: the different struggles emerged as reactions to, and at the intersections of, racism, commercialisation, and restrictive migration policies in Sweden. They formed part of a larger network of leftist, extra-parliamentarian activists, who strived towards urban and social equality in Malmö, apart from other cities in Sweden, as well as abroad.

With regards to the context of the activism studied, a decisive aspect was the particularity of the city of Malmö, a city with a high density and diversity of activist groups. Their actions were concentrated mainly within the Möllevången neighbourhood, which, in the period of its transition from industrial to financial capitalism (neoliberalism) and due to its central location and affordable housing, has attracted politically engaged people to live there.

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<sup>2</sup> For more details see Hansen (2019: 54-66).

As an ethnographer studying activism, I aimed to analyse the locally embedded emergence of social relations, values, and categories while teasing out the activists' tacit, underlying assumptions concerning their activities and subject positions as well as the challenges, ambivalences, and conflicts found within this specific socio-political practice. By examining the challenges, ambivalences, and conflicts, I intended to de-romanticise activism by showing how it is a contentious and demanding process for those involved. As a migration scholar, I aimed at identifying how activism affects social relations between different people in hierarchies of power in a particular urban context. I also situated the personal experiences and aspirations of the people featured in the study within global processes of accumulation and dispossession (Koch 2018). Lastly, with the help of perspectives from urban studies, I analysed activism as a place-making practice that opens new spaces of politics and pathways of emplacement in Malmö.

The key theories that I used to analyse the empirical material drew on Jacques Rancière's (1999, 2001, 2010) thoughts on 'the police', which refers to the consensual hierarchical order of the status quo, and 'the political', which refers to any act that disrupts this unequal order. Rancière thus theorises one specific type of participatory politics that he defines as 'the political', which is written from a certain position that assumes an emancipatory struggle with equality as its end-goal. In other words, 'true' politics, according to Rancière (2011), is an event that challenges, questions, resists, and disrupts the established order by opening up spaces for the verification and enactment of equality. The activists who have been featured in my research are working towards creating spaces that include people irrespective of their legal status, demanding access to the city's resources for everyone based on sharing and inhabiting a common urban place, including Roma and undocumented migrants. Their activism can thus be seen as "acts on the police" (Rancière 1999: 33). Furthermore, I used Hannah Arendt's (1998) 'politics of presence' and joint action. Both Arendt's and Rancière's understanding of what constitutes politics, similar to more recent theorists such as Simon Critchley (2007) and David Graeber (2009; 2013), concerns spatial practices that are disruptive and prefigurative. With prefigurative, I mean practices that create spaces for counter-hegemonic politics. The geographical concept of 'space', understood in rather simple terms as an abstract place that is socially and structurally produced, enabled me to better understand social relations and the people who have access to and appropriate a particular place, in this case Möllevången. It also enabled a critical examination of how activists fight, and contribute to its gentrification at the same time.

A central concept in left-wing activism is solidarity, which I conceptualise as a relation forged through political struggle that seeks to challenge forms of oppression (Scholtz 2008; Featherstone 2012; Stjernø 2018). I used this understanding of solidarity to analyse the impact of activism on social relations, particularly on how activists collaborate and build alliances within unequal power relations such as between migrants and non-migrants, or between citizens and those with precarious legal status. This led to interesting findings with regards to the manner in which these activists negotiated differences in positions, identities, and histories, and created new ways of relating (for details on the results, see Hansen 2019).

### Studying Radical Activism through Ethnographic Fieldwork

Ethnographic fieldwork played a crucial role in my study which was primarily directed towards exploring the locally embedded emergence of social relations and the processes that enabled them. While ethnographic fieldwork implies using a variety of qualitative methods, it always includes engagement with the lives of those being studied within the context of their daily lives and over an extended period. Ethnographies therefore permit detailed, local, contextual analysis and the portrayal of global economic forces simultaneously (Clifford 1986: 22). Methods such as participant observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations are “close to the way we all make sense of the world around us, and yet can be scientifically rigorous and systematic at the same time” (O’Reilly 2005: 1).

Before I delve into the challenges of being an ethnographer in the field of activism (and what I learnt from it), I will present the methods applied in more detail. I do this to focus on the ethnographic context within which the challenges connected to my closeness to the field arose.

I applied three main methods for data collection: participant observation, informal conversations, and in-depth interviews. I also used complementary sources of data to gain a deeper contextual understanding of the neighbourhood and of activism as a phenomenon, including previous research on Malmö, print media articles, official city documents, statistics, tourist adverts, websites, video clips (mostly from YouTube), documentaries, and photos to broaden the range of representations available for analysis.

I chose Malmö as the place of study because the city had gained the reputation of being an important activist city in contemporary Sweden, and I wanted to explore the reasons for this. In the initial phase of my research, I “followed” (Marcus 1995: 97) collective actions wherever they appeared in the city. By following the actions of the activists, it soon became clear that most collective actions and practical solidarity work took place in Möllevången, while some, for instance demonstrations and marches, took place in or moved through other parts of the city.

I undertook participant observation in various collective actions (demonstrations, social gatherings, book fairs, and cultural events, among others) during the period of 2013–2016. I observed and took notes on any left-wing extra-parliamentarian protest situation in Malmö that I was aware of, successfully documenting most of the protests occurring during that three-year period. The purpose of the participant observation was initially to map the field of activism in Malmö, and later, to gain a more detailed account of the activists’ aims, motivations, and intersecting group memberships along with their activities. Participant observation allowed me to gain an understanding of how the activists used urban space, which strategies were employed by them, and how different activist groups interacted with each other, and with the public at large. I therefore took notes on what I saw and heard, noting descriptions of my meetings with the activists in the field, anecdotes, verbal exchanges, and on the places where we met. I used a mobile phone and sometimes a digital camera both to take still pictures and record videos. These were used to support my memory and complement my fieldnotes. Through this process, a ‘natural’ selection of activist groups grew out of my material.

Following activists’ actions also lead me to online sources, where I found a great deal of activist *doing*. Digital sites complement the physical sites of activists’ activities. In a 2009 paper, Garcia, Standlee, Bechkoff, and Cui argued that the distinction between online and offline worlds are becoming increasingly merged with the two spaces interacting with and transforming one another. This overlap, which has progressed even further in the present

day, was clearly observable in my research in 2013–2016. Facebook became a significant part of my research field, since much of activist mobilisation, organisation, and communication happens in and through this social network. I made observations of the activists' online communications and interactions. To document my observations, I made screenshots of the quotes, pictures, and news feed updates.

A major part of my fieldwork included the dozens of informal conversations I engaged in with both activist and non-activist Malmö residents of various class backgrounds, migrant statuses, ages, genders, sexualities, and professions, and brief interviews conducted with passers-by (non-activists) at political events such as demonstrations. I also attended the meetings of three different activist groups which was important to better understand the organisational and networking aspects of their work. I was directly involved in the work of *Aktion mot deportation* for some three months in 2013 and in *Allt åt alla* for the same time in 2015.

I collected formal interview material with a total of 35 research participants, of which 25 were activists and ten were non-activist individuals residing or working in Möllevången. I selected the activist interviewees in this study based on their then-current or recent involvement in major, organised political actions or campaigns, and their affiliation with certain political activist groups in Malmö. However, as shown in the course of the interviews, they did not necessarily call themselves 'activists' (Hansen 2019; Povrzanović Frykman and Mäkelä 2019).

I conducted in-depth interviews with 18 activists: nine women and nine men. I moderated a panel debate on activism (in which I posed the questions) between seven local activists: four men and three women. This was recorded with the activists' consent and then transcribed. In addition, I conducted formal (short) interviews with ten non-activists who lived and/or worked in or around Möllevången and who had witnessed collective actions or experienced the activist presence, in order to learn about their perceptions of activists, activism, and the neighbourhood of Möllevången. This was to explore how the activists and their actions in the public space are perceived by non-activists against the background of a shared urban place.

Closely following social relations through practices of solidarity at the local scale allowed me to examine complex relationships of power concerning ethnicity, gender, class, and sexuality. I observed conflicts and contradictions as well as the emergence of domains of commonality and mutual practices.

### **The Researcher's Position in the Field of Activism**

For a detailed study of radical activism ethnographically, I found it necessary to employ a kind of "activist research" methodology. Charles R. Hale (2008: 20–21) has developed a framework for activist research, wherein he states that "activist research methods regularly yield special insight, insider knowledge, and experience-based understanding [...] that otherwise would be impossible to achieve". Inspired by standpoint-feminists, he argues that the validity of results produced by activist researchers is potentially stronger as their work is under scrutiny from both an academic audience and from the activists and participants they engage with. Since many of the activists within the extra-parliamentarian left (wing) in Sweden are interested in the research focused on them and are generally very knowledgeable of and literate in academic and theoretical topics, I knew from the beginning that my research results would eventually be read, in the critical sense, by some of my key research participants.

Hale (2008: 3) does not distinguish the concept of "activist research" from more well-

known concepts such as “action research” and “participatory action research”. Hale does not construct a radically new methodological approach, but instead argues that “activist research is a way to conceptualise the problems and potentials of doing research in settings where the researcher has an active engagement in a politicised issue on a personal level with a goal to achieve social change” (Lind 2017: 106).

Concerning my own involvement, since my late teenage years, I have regularly participated in political mobilisations such as demonstrations; albeit more as a ‘political consumer’ (a term used by activists to distinguish activists from non-activists) than as an activist, if ‘activist’ is to be defined as an organiser of what is revealed in the streets. Nevertheless, I do have experiences of large protest events, including the EU summit in Gothenburg 2001; the Stop the War (in Iraq) demonstration in Malmö on 15 February 2003; the anti-Bush protest in London in 2003; the G8 summit in Heiligendam in 2007; Blockupy Frankfurt in 2011; the European Social Forum (ESF) in Malmö in 2008; the Climate Change Conference (COP15) in Copenhagen in 2009 and in Paris in 2015 (COP21). The experiences of political protests listed above create an ‘insider’ position for my research on activism. During fieldwork, I was interested in participating in demonstrations in Malmö on a professional as well as personal level, since I sympathised with the activists’ aims of antiracism, feminism, and equality.

Activist research acknowledges this ambivalent dual positionality, and potentially enables more reflexivity about issues of objectivity, transparency, and power inequalities (ibid). The question is how to move between these two positionalities. Duncan Fuller (1999) considers the potential role of the “researcher as activist” and attempts to illustrate how the maintenance of a critical, multi-positioned (and repositioned) identity can be seen as a beneficial, reflexive learning experience for researchers within ethnography and in terms of the research itself. He argues that:

In our daily lives, we are constantly repositioning and renegotiating our identities and personalities in line with different situations, different spaces, and different people, and we seem to do so relatively unproblematically; we are different people in different circumstances, we have different identities or roles in different spaces or places. When confronted with the seemingly straightforward task of moving between academic and activist identities or activities, however, a range of concerns seems to come to the fore. (Fuller 1999: 223)

These concerns are partly due to the fact that shared physical experiences are likely to develop emotions that are collectively shared but individually constituted, between the researcher (me, in this case) and the research participants (Petray 2012). Placing myself bodily in the same situations as those on whom I based my research (e.g. in demonstrations and sit-ins) gave me a deeper understanding of their world. This would not have been possible had I just restricted myself to verbal inquiry (Savage 2000: 331). My experiences confirm that affects and emotions have a revelatory potential in fieldwork (Frykman and Povrzanović Frykman 2016; Henry 2012; Trigger, Forsey, and Meurk 2012).

Throughout the fieldwork, I was stunned by the activists’ passion for politics and action. In all my interview encounters, I felt a kind of affinity with the interviewees (like the one described by Wasshede 2010: 59). These feelings and affinities forced me to continuously reflect on their possible implications for my fieldwork and writing. Proximity and shared experiences were of great advantage since distance from the field would have prevented interviews with core activists. Trust was crucial for gaining access, particularly when it came

to approaching activists who use civil disobedience or unlawful modes of action; they are in a precarious situation as they sometimes operate in legal grey zones and generally face repression from police and state authorities (McCurdy and Uldam 2013). Proximity and shared experiences also meant that I was relatively acquainted with the language, codes, and central problematics existing in the activist milieu that I set out to study (Wasshede 2010: 59).

Going beyond ideological sympathies and protest experiences, I further shared a national citizenship with most of my research participants; and by living in Malmö, I also held an insider position within the fieldwork site. Shared nationality and local experiences are considered to be aspects of an insider position (McCurdy and Uldam 2013). In my case, the abovementioned aspects together with my personal relations with some of the activists (which further accentuated my “insider” position) were important when accessing the field. However, there are no clear-cut insider and outsider positions in terms of being a participant observer: these roles were negotiated on a continuum that shifted between field sites and were related to the varying degrees that I either shared or did not share the abovementioned aspects with my research participants. The question of where I found myself on the insider/outsider continuum demanded critical reflection throughout the fieldwork and research period. These reflections made my research endeavour indeed a “messy” process, where I encountered multiple uncomfortable situations and also, as I experienced it, failures in fieldwork (Pillow 2003). It was a never-ending struggle to strive for academic insights beyond and despite my ideological biases and personal experiences of the political and practical issues that activists work with on the ground.

Another relevant methodological approach I used for my study was Helen Owton and Jacquelyn Allen-Collinson’s (2013) “friendship as method” within ethnographic research encounters. The friendship approach seeks to reduce the hierarchical separation between the researcher and participant: it encourages a dialogical relationship and an ethic of caring that invites expressiveness, emotion, and empathy between the two actors (ibid.: 285). Yet it is important to acknowledge that however much of the research field I share with my participants, our experiences of activism are never quite the same. Everybody has unique histories and experiences of being gendered and racialised; and, as many of those featuring in my research including myself have experienced, of being physically violated, policed, and even imprisoned, all of which has formed and affected us in specific political ways. I have therefore been wary of assuming the commonality of experience (ibid.: 297), which led me for instance, to examining the theoretical roots of certain boundary-making between different activists in Malmö, an examination that I come back to under ‘Challenges and Concerns’ below.

At the same time, my proximity to the field raised challenges. Being an insider geographically (to the place) and ideologically (leftist politics), I owed myself, my research participants, and the reader particular transparency concerning the challenges related to this complex positionality. However, I am not claiming that by trying to make my positions transparent, they become less problematic (Spivak 2010), but simply trying to highlight some of “the uncomfortable realities of doing engaged qualitative research” (Pillow 2003: 193). The remainder of this article explains the challenges and concerns in conducting ethnographic research on activism in my own socio-cultural environment.

### Challenges and Concerns

From the beginning, I felt insecure about acting as a researcher among the activists, not knowing what they would think of me doing research on them and their work, and whether I would face opposition towards my dual roles as an academic and an activist. As already stated, trust is crucial in the process of gaining access. If the activists thought I was doing something that might harm them or their work, they would not talk to me. My insecurity was based on a desire to be seen as a useful activist, as well as a useful researcher in front of my activist peers (Hansen 2017). I had to remind myself that whatever “good intentions” I had with the research, such as generating academic insights on the impact activism had on the place that is to be studied and on a larger societal scale, it might not generate the same level of excitement among the activists in Malmö.

My research topic was mostly met with positive reactions and encouragement among my research participants. One female activist shared her views and said that she thought my research seemed “interesting”, an ambivalent term with multiple interpretations. She further commented, “those topics are valuable for us to know more about. We don’t have time to think about them ourselves”. Another activist said my work was important because “no one is writing about the autonomous movement and its history”, and that their work in Malmö was not being documented or recorded academically. These statements were also a reminder of the possibilities of misunderstandings and even disappointments on the part of the activists – that I was writing on topics that they did not see as directly relevant to their work – and I was aware that informed consent would not prevent those issues from happening. There was also the risk that my research findings would result in insights the activists may not be happy with and writing activists’ history in Malmö was not my primary goal. As of today, I am not aware of any criticism on my research from the activists. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, I have not yet conducted the seminars for activists in Malmö that I had planned for. I have a pending invitation to present my research at Allt åt alla’s venue in Malmö – once such events are realisable again – an occasion that can open up spaces for critical discussions on my research.

I also realised I was not going to do what many critical activist scholars suggest, namely “to make strategic interventions collectively with the social movements we belong to” (Autonomous Geographies Collective 2010: 247), in order to achieve social change, in line with Participatory Action Research (PAR)-approaches. Since PAR emphasises participation and action from the people affected by the research, such an approach would most probably point the research in another direction and prevent me from exploring activism ethnographically with certain research questions grounded in critical migration and urban studies theories. I was also worried about whether the activists would consider me as “operating in a parasitical relationship to those who are doing the real work and have made financial/lifestyle sacrifices” (ibid.: 252), while I had a full salary, and in addition, was using this very research to become “an expert” on the subject in the eyes of academia. Even though I have not faced or been personally criticised with such comments, they do contain elements of truth in my case too, and this has made me think and re-think about the motives, ethics, and intentions of my research. I did not want to be another one in the mass of academics who would happily build their careers on the backs of researching the oppressed but rarely join them in their “struggle” (ibid.: 247).

However, I noticed discontent towards academics from two of my research participants.

One of them mentioned how dozens of under- and postgraduates and senior scholars had gotten in touch with them, conducted interviews, and then never contacted them again. This made her unwilling to collaborate with academics. With such experiences, I am not surprised that activists have the idea of academics as capitalising on activists' activity for their own career development. She still decided to talk to me because she already knew me and had some level of trust in what I was doing, and because I was doing a PhD rather than an undergraduate thesis. She said that she prioritised and participated according to the academic level and relevance of the study.

My initial insecurity was also an outcome of a central ethical concern with this study: the risk that the ethnographic material could be used by the police in their surveillance of activists. Upon raising this doubt with a core activist with vast experience in the extra-parliamentarian milieu in Sweden, he said to me calmly: "you won't really be able to write anything that the police don't already know about us". Still, I could not accept his statement as fact. Interestingly, during the time of my fieldwork, a vivid internal debate in the activist scene in Malmö took place concerning research projects conducted on activists. This was after it was made clear that an activist had taken a job as a research assistant in a project financed by the same government ministry that leads the project on identifying and counteracting "violence-promoting extremism" (*våldsbejakande extremism*) (SOU 2013), in which the group that the research assistant was a member of, had been defined as "extremist" by the government. The situation provoked a debate on the activists' relationship with, and perception of, the state. This debate and the fact that parts of the activist scene perceived it as legitimate to take this kind of job, could be a sign of a recent pragmatic turn in today's generation of activists who do not dismiss the state entirely (Piotrowski and Wennerhag 2015), even when it comes to collaborating in state-financed research on themselves.

The concern that my research could contribute to the surveillance of activists was nevertheless real and required me to attempt to the fullest of my abilities not to write anything, or reveal any information, that could be used by state or police officials in a way that may harm or hinder the activists' work. One way to prevent this was to not include detailed presentation of my interviewees in the dissertation. However, since the study was limited to Malmö and Möllevången, and people in activist networks are mostly aware of each other, there was a risk that activists reading the dissertation would be able to relate some information (age, profession, experience) to certain activists, although this would only be guesswork. As one interviewee said, "If you write 'an activist of X-country-descent', all of Malmö will know who it is, because there is only one or perhaps two". Therefore, I not only changed the names of the research participants but also removed details concerning some (but not all) of the interviewees that might permit easy identification, such as country of origin or citizenship.

During the interviews, I raised the ethical issue of internal identification with my research participants. They expressed an understanding of the risk but no real concerns about being identified by friends and "political comrades". Presenting many activists' stories when discussing emerging themes, rather than using a smaller sample size, helped to obscure the identities of individual activists and reduced the risk of identification.

My experience confirms Lind's (2017) argument that discussing ethical issues with the research participants can become a knowledge process in its own right. It was important for me not to shy away from the ambivalences I felt in conducting ethnographic research among

radical activists, but to discuss them, make the interviewees aware of these ambivalences, and incorporate their own concerns into the study.

An analytical and theoretical challenge that I encountered was that many of the activists I interviewed were well read in, and sometimes referred to, the same theories and concepts that I used to analyse my empirical material. This could present a risk of circular reasoning: that I analyse their statements partly based on the same analytical frameworks that their statements are based on; my theories confirm their statements and vice versa (Wasshede 2010: 61). Apart from the risk of circular reasoning, there was also a risk of making my own analysis redundant. In case an interviewee analyses his/her own actions from, for example, a Marxist perspective, there would be little to gain from an academic point of view if I apply a Marxist perspective to his/her actions as recounted in the interview.

To avoid circular reasoning, I had to continuously remind myself of the academic purposes of my research project (as presented in the second section of this article) and to uncover tensions and contradictions in their statements, for example between ideals and practices. In this way I departed from analysing the interviewees' own logic, and critically examined the statements themselves in line with the research questions and theoretical perspectives of my research project (Wasshede 2010: 64). One example of a contradiction I found was the inconsistency where some class struggle-oriented activists, in their interviews, favoured larger cross-ideological collaborations, but sometimes avoided those same collaborations in practice. Or how some class struggle-oriented activists expressed an appreciation of the plethora of activist groups and struggles existing in Malmö in theory, but at the same time revealed judgemental attitudes toward some of those same groups, framing themselves as being the "true radicals" in comparison to pro-asylum activists (Hansen 2020). Even in the most well-intended spaces of solidarity such as the one the activists intend to create in Möllevången, the challenges of boundary making must be dealt with. In these cases, the boundary making was primarily found between different political clusters rather than along divisions of class, gender, ethnicity, or sexuality. Instead, each activist's positioning of themselves and "the other activists" takes place on a continuum of political positionalities from "radical" to "liberal"<sup>3</sup> (or "radical" versus "liberal") and on a continuum of perceptions of what constitutes "the true struggle". I suggest that this tension between inclusion and exclusion is an illustration of many activists' awareness of the need to overcome current material and divisive divisions within the 'working class' or 'the multitude', at least in theory if not more (Hardt and Negri 2004). This needs to be done in order to achieve social change, while at the same time having to deal with their different internal ideological and theoretical roots, in actual practice.

Another contradiction that I identified was how the activists simultaneously resist and contribute to the gentrification of Möllevången, and how this simultaneous resistance and compliance to power (Hollander and Einwohner 2004), is a frustrating contradiction for the activists who want to live and act in Möllevången. My critical examination of the activists also concerned their experimenting and building of relationships among people in unequal power relations (e.g. activists with citizenship and Roma migrants or undocumented refugees)

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<sup>3</sup>In leftist circles, the term "liberal" has taken on a negative connotation and refers to the liberal political ideology with an individual's freedom at its core. It can describe a person or an idea that supports free market and limited government intervention concerning redistribution of wealth through taxes. A "liberal", in leftist circles, thus usually refers to a person who upholds the current hegemonic relation of power, implicitly or explicitly.

which was anything but straightforward. Speaking on behalf of migrants without legal status, as was done by the activists in Malmö, brings about issues of paternalism (Cappiali 2017). What I found in my research was that the unequal power dynamics in activists' solidarity with migrants in precarious legal conditions made it difficult, although not impossible, to establish personal relationships, deep friendships, and romantic relationships.

My position of a partial insider as presented in the previous section required me to develop the courage and skills to critically assess the activists and their actions, and to accept the risk of my research results being criticised by the activists, or of myself being rejected by parts of the activist scene in the city. As my fieldwork progressed, I became more skilled in balancing the academic requirement to critically examine the contradictions and conflictual aspects inherent to their activism, while maintaining friendly and professional relations with the activists themselves.

The final challenge was regarding the ethical questions that normally arise from online research. On the Internet, the researcher is not "around" but rather observing from a distant computer screen, which can be interpreted as "lurking" (Garcia et al. 2009). Although conversations on Facebook are publicly accessible to any user, the blurring of public and private in such online spaces means that observing or recording those conversations may be interpreted as unpermitted or invasive by those observed. The blurred nature of the online world raises many such ethical issues around access to data and techniques for the protection of privacy and confidentiality, and since a large part of activism and political discussion happens online, it was crucial for me to include online observations. My response is to interpret social media platforms such as Facebook as "virtual squares", thus public spaces where unannounced ethnographic observations are made. Consequently, I was not a member of any closed groups on Facebook for the purpose of the study.

In the end, the most important ethical consideration is how the researcher eventually writes and publishes the material, as representing one's research participants ethically is perhaps the most complex problem faced by ethnographic writers (Kahn 2011). Hence, the writing-up process required critical reflexivity on my part. A way to compensate on my initial concerns was to ask two activists to read an early draft of the entire dissertation and incorporate their feedback into the revision process, including adjusting the work based on their reactions and removing certain details where requested. This enabled me to revise my dissertation constructively by using the insights of the people involved to create a more nuanced and informed picture of the achievements of activist movements.

## Conclusions

This article primarily highlighted many of the practical, theoretical, and ethical challenges encountered in the field while conducting research among radical activists in Malmö. It showed some of the complexities involved in gaining access to this field, and in cases where the researcher shares theoretical and analytical vantage points with some of the activists. It is partly the contentious character of activism that requires the researcher to align with the activists' struggle to gain access, and my previous experiences and knowledge of this kind of activism made it possible for me to observe the activist scene in Malmö.

Applying the approaches of "researcher as activist" and "friendship as method" allowed me to gain deep insights into the field of activism. My proximity also raised challenges, the main one being developing the ability to engage in an ethical, respectful, yet critical ethnography of the people and the social process studied, despite my ideological and

emotional affinity with the activists.

The critical engagement I pursued in my ethnographic research involved a continual questioning of my positioning in the research process (in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, activist experiences and acquaintances, and experiences of living in the neighbourhood) in addition to the physical location of my research and my political position. Put simply, as a researcher, I had to continuously learn and re-learn how to move between my various identities and to be aware of (and try to read) the impacts these movements had on my research. I developed these skills throughout the research process, which I see as an integral part of the learning and documentation of the ethnographic method.

Through this reflective account of how I encountered and approached dilemmas in conducting an ethnography of political activism, I have tried to demonstrate the value and benefits of raising potential ethical concerns with research participants, both as a way to learn with the activists, and to understand the activists' concerns regarding my research.

The risk of criticism and even rejection by the activists was the cause of great ambivalence from my part initially, but at the same time served as an invitation to reflect and gain a deeper understanding about the field of study (Lind 2017), especially concerning the critical examination of the contradictions found in activist practice. What I interpreted as challenges in the beginning often turned out to be opportunities to gain even deeper insights of the field. For e.g. when a core activist appeared calm and was not worried about me being able to reveal anything that could harm the activists from the perspective of police surveillance, nor of the fact that some research participants may potentially be recognised by activist-peers, challenges turned into opportunities. Nevertheless, the emotional stress that I have described in this article is not only part and parcel of a morally grounded ethnographic fieldwork, but serves as an entry point to a deeper understanding of the field of research.

One major challenge in activist research concerns the aspect of following up with research results and the “giving back” to the activists, as critically mentioned by one of my research participants. It is important to not leave it at only publishing the results as articles in academic journals—which most of the time will certainly not be read by the activists due to its generally inaccessible format and language. I intend to organise workshops on my research results with the activists and raise the critical aspects together with them. With the activists' consent, I hope to be able to record these discussions and use them to analyse the actual impacts of my research on the activist scene and whether my results may be useful for them in their activism ahead. For example, how they can use my results concerning boundary making between different activist groups in a way to work together despite differences for the purpose of mobilising larger and inclusive disruptive protests.

One important factor that explains why researchers fail on the part of giving back to the field of study itself, can be found in the nature of academic research projects, their organisation in time and how they are financially conditioned by the research institutes – that prioritise research outputs in terms of published articles. Researchers are commonly not given the paid and scheduled time for “going back” to the people and the field where all the empirical data once was collected. When this task depends on individual researcher's good will and free time, they slip away.

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