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## Jennifer Mack (2017) The Construction of Equality

### Syriac Immigration and the Swedish City

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**Jennifer Mack**, *The Construction of Equality: Syriac Immigration and the Swedish City*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017. ISBN 978-0-8166-9869-1 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-8166-9871-4 (paper)

This book is a meticulously detailed ethnography, analytically unfolding the actions of a group of Syriac immigrants since the mid 1960s in socially and physically reshaping Södertälje, a Swedish town on the outskirts of Stockholm. The book traces their passage from being a Christian minority in their countries of origin (Turkey and the Middle East) to becoming “refugees” in Sweden, to later on being identified as “immigrants”. Mack explicitly depicts the ways in which the diasporic Syriac Orthodox Christians have sought to resume their traditional ways of life in protective enclaves by challenging the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish welfare state, which back then practised “assimilation” of newcomers through categorization and geographical distribution. She does so through a very rigorous examination of their efforts to transform Södertälje, one model of the utopian national project known as the “Million Program” (*Miljonprogrammet*). The Swedish welfare state had built more than a million dwelling units across the country from 1965 to 1974, in order to eliminate class differences and achieve social equality by providing uniform housing and planned spaces. Such an approach by Swedish officials, linking social and spatial equality with the dispersion of newcomers, clashed with the Syriacs’ way of living. Hence, the Syriacs worked to deconstruct the formal uniformity of a planned utopia through spatial practices, which often lacked professional expertise (the author labels this “urban design from below”), to protect their traditions of concentration, enclosure and, to a certain extent, isolation.

Throughout the book, Mack seeks to introduce different approaches to comprehend centre-periphery relations, and to challenge common views on enclavization through the case study of Södertälje. Enclavization, she contends, “is not always a negative force, and those who are geographically segregated are not always on the social

margins” (p.11). In this regard, she urges for a new understanding of how enclaves operate, as they “may be a productive force in the future of European societies and cities” (p.18). She also argues that there is an urgent need to draw attention to the “often-overlooked generative potential” of segregated areas (p.4).

The strength of the book lies in its empirically embedded research and insightful analysis of the production of Södertälje. Mack offers novel perspectives on European suburban spatial practices while carefully outlining their generative capacities. She does so throughout the course of the book by engaging with the idea of “urban design from below”; that is, “the transformation of space at the urban scale through the slow accumulation of architectural projects that non-designers initiate” (p.4). Methodologically, she combines extensive ethnographic accounts and interviews with material from historical archives and planning documents. Drawing upon various detailed examples, Mack illustrates the whole process very early on, guiding the reader to grasp the idea empirically and in concrete aspects. All this is to emphasize how the universalism of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism, as a way to eradicate social inequality, has been and is still transformed by immigrants’ initiatives “from below”. This offers new insights towards enclavization, urging professional designers, planners and policy makers to rethink and re-evaluate their assumptions and practices.

Over the course of the book, Mack mobilises a set of examples of how the Syriac immigrants employed different spatial practices in reshaping and redefining Södertälje’s Million Program neighbourhoods. There were adaptations to the spaces of the welfare state through remodelling already existing facilities into Syriac ones, such as the Worker’s Educational Association that has been altered into a Syriac national club, and the Lutheran church in the town centre transformed into an Orthodox one, and there were architectural projects created from scratch (yet approved through official planning processes) such as the Södertälje Soccer Arena and the lavish Syriac neighbourhood of single-family houses. In her book, Mack notably illustrates how such projects, whether

built for the entire community of Syriacs or individual families, are to last for the coming generations, thus marking the territory of Södertälje as the centre for the Syriac diaspora, or more precisely the Syriac capital in exile, dubbed “Mesopotälje”.

Despite Mack’s capacity to capture such empirically rich arguments supported by her well-articulated analysis, there are a few issues that the author could have better addressed in the book. Firstly, I would have liked more methodological reflections on the author’s positionality while conducting the fieldwork in relation to race, class and gender, and consequently to reveal the emergent dynamics of such intersectionality in her ethnographic applications. Secondly, I was looking forward to a discussion of the relations between the Syriac immigrant community and other immigrants and/or refugees, especially within the past years with the more recent arrival of refugees. The author briefly mentions this issue in Chapter 5 while having a conversation with one of her informants, who claimed that the recent influx of refugees from Syria and Iraq has “ruined” one of Södertälje’s neighbourhoods (p.175). Such accounts are essential and it is important that these dynamics are explored and further discussed. This, consequently, brings me to mention the last issue that the author somehow did not engage directly in, which is the Syriacs’ political subjectivity within Swedish politics and how this affects their relations with and views towards immigration and asylum politics in Sweden.

Nevertheless, this is an important, rich work that challenges currently dominant thoughts on Swedish suburban development, especially in a time when Sweden is witnessing political and economic fluctuations, with the rise to power of the right wing alongside to an upswing of neoliberalism and privatization, diluting and challenging the welfare state models in comparison to market-oriented solutions. Lastly, it is an inspiring and a valuable reader for scholars from different disciplines, primarily architecture and urban studies, who are interested in the spatial development of European suburbs and various everyday socio-spatial practices.

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# ANTIPODE

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