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PLACES OF DYING AND RITUALS OF MOURNING

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In a fire at a discotheque in Gothenburg, Sweden in 1998, 63 young people died and over 200 were injured. The deceased, 12 to 20 years of age, represented 19 different nationalities. Those who were rescued criticised the police and the fire department for being too slow in coming to the aid of their friends. Families of the victims were suspicious of the authorities and rumours spread of the fire having been started by racists. After an extensive police investigation, four young persons suspected of having set the fire to get revenge on those in charge of the discotheque were arrested and were later convicted of gross arson. Backaplan, the little square and street in front of the building where the fire occurred, became a memorial site. Young people and families of the victims assembled there to honour the deceased with candles, flowers and poems. The second night after the fire, Backaplan was lit up with some 3,000 candles. Fruits, angel figures, caps and flags from the countries of origin of the deceased were placed there. Three weeks later, when I visited Backaplan, I was strongly affected emotionally by all the reminders of the deceased that had been placed there by their friends. It was quite cold and the flowers and many objects of symbolic value were covered with frost. In contrast, I saw a teddy bear with a scorched stomach lying near a candle. The icy weather and the signs of death, destruction and injury the fire had caused highlighted the tragedy.

Backaplan, to be sure, is not the only spot in Sweden to have gained public attention as the scene of a disaster. Places where serious car accidents have occurred, or where someone has been murdered, are sometimes also assigned importance in this way. Relatives of the Swedish victims of the tsunami disaster in Thailand a few months ago have shown an obvious desire to visit the area where their loved ones died. Some persons have claimed that honouring the dead by drawing attention to such locations is a new custom in Sweden, one largely established after the murder of Prime Minister Olof Palme in 1986. Yet deceased persons have been honoured in this way far earlier. For example, in Näsrum, a parish in southern Sweden, stones and crosses were erected in the seventeenth century at spots where murders, duels or accidents had occurred (Eskilsson 1981; Näsrum Hembygds- och Fornminnesförenings Årsbok 1993 & 1995). According to the ethnologist Louise Hagberg, it was once common to erect a stone or carve the name of the deceased on a tree at the location of an accident or a murder

(Hagberg 1937:527). These early practices appear to have been revived in the late of the twentieth century. Most people dying then in hospitals (as is still the case) and Sweden not having participated in either World War I or World War II, there thus being few war memorials that could serve as places for contemporary mourning.

An interesting aspect of contemporary memorial places in Sweden connected with accidents, murders and the like is that they have been chosen by the affected in a bottom-up manner, as opposed to the top-down approach of churches and town halls in dealing with deceased persons. The same behaviour can be seen in Britain (Walter 2001).

The aim of the present paper is to analyse how Backaplan came to be considered an important place after the fire. How did the authorities and the relatives and friends of the victims contribute to this? In my doctoral dissertation I examined the role of both the organised professional routines and the spontaneous unifying processes that provided support for those affected by the fire. It was shown in interviews with those affected that support came not only from social workers, psychologists and priests but also from "crisis groups"¹ organised spontaneously by the immigrants involved as well as from social networks the latter maintained. According to theories of Émile Durkheim (1912/2001), both professional and spontaneous processes are interwoven in measures of collective mourning undertaken under such circumstances. The spontaneously organized crisis groups helped in establishing contacts between authorities and the families that were affected. The social networks available also provided obvious support, although one weakness of support of a more spontaneous type is that it is likely to gradually decline when friends no longer have the energy to listen. The professionals involved contributed to the positive effect of the social networks through encouraging persons affected by the fire to meet. They also realised the significance of such symbolic acts as helping young people visit their friends' graves or letting the family see the scene of the fire before renovation was undertaken (Nieminen Kristofersson 2002).

Efforts were made by the city of Gothenburg to let Backaplan be a place of mourning. In the present paper, I explore the significance of Backaplan in terms of theories of place and of collective rituals.

The significance of place and of ritual

Yi-Fu Tuan argues that most people have affective bonds with particular places. He writes, "Topophilia is not the strongest of human emotions. When it is compelling we can be sure that the place or environment has become the carrier of emotionally charged events or perceived as a symbol." (Tuan 1974/1990:93).

¹ The "crisis groups" referred to are composed of representatives of the social services, schools, churches and voluntary organisations. They are supposed to be a complement to the emergency response of the health services. The aim of the measures they provide is to give those who are afflicted by a disaster support in an acute situation.

Tuan distinguishes between public places and what he terms “fields of care”. Public places include monuments and buildings connected with a nation’s or a community’s history and with the power of the state, such as the Houses of Parliament in England and war memorials. They are visible for tourists and for visitors generally. Fields of care are not easy for a visitor to recognise. They are places where human beings create emotional ties with one another, such as in one’s home, in the home of one’s parents, in a restaurant where one often dines with one’s friends, and the like. Social networks require a physical and material environment. “The feel of place gets under our skin in the course of day-to-day contact” (Rasmussen 1962 in Tuan 1999:452). Time is also essential for fields of care since extended contacts are needed to establish emotional ties and social networks (Tuan 1999:455). Authorities exercise a degree of control over public places and those present there. As Foucault (1993) indicates, in schools, places of work and hospitals, for example, time schedules are a form of disciplining of those involved (Foucault 1993).

Topophilia can have a nostalgic character. At the same time, a place with basically a single identity, in which virtually no change occurs, and in which one feels safe and is able to escape the complexity of life creates boundaries. Those who transverse the boundaries are regarded as constituting a threat. Doreen Massey argues for a more varying definition of the sense of place (Massey 1994), emphasizing that it differs from identification with a particular community, for example. Communities can exist without always being in the same location. Such is the case for social networks of friends. There is seldom a homogenous community, since people differ in the position they have within the community. Thus, there may be more than one historical identity connected with a particular community. A place is constructed through social interaction and by identities that vary over time. The boundaries at any given time need not be permanent. Instead, people and ideas from outside can become part of a place. Today’s rapid communications and globalization contribute to the formation of a “*mixture of wider and more local social relations*” (Massey 1994:156). A place tends, nevertheless, to have a unique meaning for those who meet there, the significance of a place being continually reproduced and enhanced as people come together.

When the death of someone occurs, there are changes in interaction, the group to which the person belonged being at least temporarily weakened. Émile Durkheim regards rites of mourning as being important under such conditions, the group being strengthened by assembling in this way. During such rites the group becomes strongly conscious of itself. To express sorrow and feelings of other types under such conditions, people often make use of material things to anchor them to. For example, a flag – although it is just a piece of cloth – can symbolise a whole nation (Durkheim 1912/2001). Randall Collins has developed Durkheim’s theory further into a theory of interaction rituals. The ingredients of such rituals are those of the group assembling with a mutual focus of attention, maintaining barriers toward outsiders and sharing a common mood or emotional experience. When interaction is positive, there are collective forces that generate solidarity within the group and emotional energy in individual members. Symbols and moral principles that the group has in common are also created (Collins 2004:48-49).

Sports activities in which those participating have in common a set of fans and also friends and colleagues one meets and converses with are an example. On the basis of his theory, Collins attempts to explain why there are differences in social networks. He considers there to be more than simply a single vertical stratification in society separating different classes from one another. He emphasizes the fact that when emotional energy is lacking or powerful persons dominate, interaction may fail to attract everyone, and also that people tend to participate in interactions that give them emotional energy and a sense of membership in the group.

Backaplan - a charged place after the fire

The discotheque where the fire occurred was planned as a party for young people between 12 and 20 years of age, most of them from suburban families of foreign origin. It was arranged for by a group called *The Playaz Club*. It was held in the meeting hall of the Macedonian Association, situated in an old factory building in the Hissingen district, about 1,5 km outside the city proper of Gothenburg. A tramway and a highway leading into the city passed close to the building. In the neighbourhood there were some shops and just outside the building there was a small square. During a period of several days after the fire, thousands of relatives and friends of the dead and the injured visited the square and placed flowers, poems and lighted candles there. The "bed" of memorial objects was about 500 m long and 2-3 m wide. Several young people remained at the square throughout night in honour of the victims. Voluntary organisations, such as the Red Cross and social workers from the crisis groups that already existed supported the young people with food and blankets. Journalists provided reports of the place on TV and in the newspapers. Soon after the fire, Backaplan became a protected area. A policeman kept watch of the building and of the square because it was also in a high-crime area. Removing the things of memorial character there was not permitted (Hagström & Sundelius 2001, Nieminen Kristofersson 2002).

Why did this place become a protected area? After a very serious tram accident in the center of Gothenburg in 1992, flowers and candles were placed in the street beside the tram stop. The next morning all of them were removed. People disapproved very much of this. Accordingly, after the fire in the discotheque, the city authorities were very conscious of the significance of such a memorial site. Lars Lilled, a coordinator that the City of Gothenburg employed for providing and arranging for long-term support for the relatives and friends of the victims, felt it was natural that Backaplan be made a memorial spot. Adults were able to have contact in a very natural way with young people there. Memorial ceremonies were held there as well. These helped to bring together the mourning friends and relatives of the victims with professionals from the various crisis groups. "I am unable to fully understand what the parents involved experienced," Lars Lilled declared, "but there is very much that we have experienced which we have in common" (Magnusson 2005:42).

After several weeks, the memorial objects were finally removed from Backaplan, after consultation with the relatives. The flowers were composted and the poems, letters, CDs and most of the other things were transferred to The Museum of

Gothenburg. The candles were sent to a convent in Vadstena, where the nuns melted them down and made 63 new candles, now kept in the renovated meeting hall where the fire occurred.

The relatives wanted to visit the meeting hall before renovation was begun, and they were invited to do so with the support of the crisis groups. It appeared to be important for the relatives to be able to see the place where their loved ones had died. After a bus accident in Norway in 1988 in which there were Swedish schoolchildren and adults who died, many of the relatives travelled to Norway to see the site of the accident. A first anniversary of the accident was also held there, the relatives being invited to attend (Edholm Johansson 1998). In Chile, the places where people were arrested and killed during the Pinochet dictatorship have been visited by the relatives and victims as an important part of the therapy and rehabilitation that they have been provided (Frazier & Scarpaci 1998).

Six months after the fire, a memorial ceremony was held at Backaplan, and a ceremony marking the first anniversary of the fire was also held there six months later, a member of the Swedish cabinet and local politicians assisting in it. At the time of the second anniversary, the meeting hall, which had since become a memorial hall, was open to the public. A wall with a human being in silhouette provides a memory of those who died in the fire (Hagström & Sundelius 2001).

For the young people who participated in the fateful events at Backaplan, the discotheque had been a place that evening in which there were strong positive feelings and interactions, although certain small conflicts occurred that led to the disaster, to the space becoming a place of death. The young people I interviewed told of their considering it to be important that they go there *together*. Social workers from different crisis groups followed the young people who were in mourning to Backaplan, providing them with paper and pens so they could write down greetings and poems to their dead friends (Nieminen Kristofersson 2002). Backaplan had originally been a field of care in Tuan's sense, but after the fire had become a public place associated with death and mourning. Gathering there to honour one's deceased friends was a spontaneous ritual, one that strengthened the group in a Durkheimian sense. There was a mutual focus of attention and a sharing of experiences, a matter which Collins (2004) has observed, his also referring to barriers toward outsiders being a frequent ritual ingredient. Yet Backaplan had no such barriers. It was open to everyone. Social workers told, in fact, of people who had no connection with the victims visiting the spot because they felt lonely (Magnusson 2005). Nevertheless, the small groups of mourning young people assembled at Backaplan may often have been closed to outsiders. The collective effervescence evident there implied to be group solidarity and emotional energy. Symbols for the group were also created. What became of the symbol which the fire itself represented? This is not easy to discern, yet people talked about "the 63 angels". When I visited Backaplan I saw some plastic angels lying among the many other things of memorial character. Collins argues that ideas, words and gestures can also be symbols. He emphasizes the importance to the group that symbols be respected and points out that the feelings of morality and rightness found in a group can lead to efforts of the group to defend itself

against transgressors. Collins underlines an element of mutual bodily presence often found in rituals. Although one could mourn the death of a well-known person by watching his/her funeral on TV, Collins considers rituals to work best if people are assembled in a concrete physical place since this makes them aware of each other's focus of attention (Collins 2004).

The spontaneous rituals of the young people and of the relatives were mixed with formal rituals in the form of ceremonies held by priests at Backaplan and in churches in Gothenburg. Social workers, priests and other professionals, as well as volunteers from various organisations were all present at Backaplan. The work of the Gothenburg authorities was interwoven with interactions that took place between the relatives and friends of the victims. Despite a church in the neighbourhood being open, where social workers offered people professional support, the relatives preferred to assemble at Backaplan. Lars Lilled noted that, in the work of coordinating the psychological and social support that those affected by the tragedy were being offered, it was important to be at the best possible location. If the young people decided to assemble at Backaplan, support should be available there. Lilled (Magnusson 2005:36-42) suggests that if the fire had occurred during the summer, friends of the victims might well have built an encampment at Backaplan.

Providing support included certain efforts to control spontaneous rituals. About a week after the fire, the head of youth psychiatry in Gothenburg expressed the view that the young people involved, rather than gathering at Backaplan, should return to normal living conditions, eating and sleeping at home (Nieminen Kristofersson 2002). Foucault (1993) writes of the control of the individual in modern society and the role of the "psycho-professions" in this connection. He expresses the aim of people with difficulties being brought back to normal, not by violence or compulsion, but by their being given psychotherapy, counselling and/or social support. He regards control as including matters both of place and time. Applied to the present case, this could mean that the young people should be in school rather than at Backaplan. Psychiatric thinking often dominates in the professional support that the relatives of victims are provided after disasters. Those affected are at risk of developing psychological problems, including posttraumatic stress disorders, if they do not receive help quickly. Since such disorders are outside the realm of normal experience, dealing with them is a task for the professional (Nieminen Kristofersson 2002). It is curious that the psychiatric crisis theory of Johan Cullberg (1975, 1999), often referred to by the Swedish professionals, makes no mention of visiting or creating places of memorial character representing part of the therapy that could be provided following a death.

Despite the statement by the psychiatrist just referred to, Backaplan remained a place filled with affections and with memories, both positive and negative. The authorities of the city allowed thousands of persons to assemble there to honour the victims. The role that the place itself and the things of memorial character there had, was respected. How did this understanding of the young people and of the relatives of the victims on the part not only of the professionals but also of the

local authorities come about? One explanation might be that members of both groups were strongly affected and emotionally very much moved by the disaster - as individuals, as members of society and as citizens of Gothenburg.

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