



Radical Left Movements in Scandinavia, 1980–2020: Straddling Militant Counterculture and Popular Movements

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter traces the development of radical left activism in Scandinavia from the 1980s to the 2010s. It focuses on the branch of the radical left that bases its ideas in libertarian strands of socialism, what we refer to as the Radical Left-Libertarian Movement (RLLM).¹ Since the 1980s, the RLLM has been the most dominant branch of the radical left in Scandinavia. Unlike their Marxist-Leninist predecessors of the 1960s and 1970s, RLLM activists combined their commitment to anti-capitalist politics with anti-authoritarian and anti-statist positions (Ekman Jørgensen 2008; Östberg 2002). The RLLM also introduced a more confrontational tactical repertoire in Scandinavian radical left

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activism, including violent and nonviolent direct action such as the occupation of buildings, blockades, and, to some extent, physical violence against political opponents and their property. However, at the same time the RLLM maintained many of the issues, strategies, and organizational forms that had earlier characterized the radical left.

The chapter focuses on the development of the RLLM in Sweden and Denmark, the two Scandinavian countries that have had the most active radical left movements from the 1980s and onwards.² In these countries, the more prominent role of the RLLM within the wider radical left can be clearly noted in numbers of protest events (Jämte et al. 2020; Karpantschov and Mikkelsen 2002; Mikkelsen 2002) and in the influence it has had on other movements' ideas, practices, and organizational forms (Jämte et al. forthcoming). The state and the police have also come to regard the RLLM as the central radical left milieu. Up until the 1980s, the RLLM was often considered a marginal threat to order and state security, especially compared to revolutionary Marxist-Leninist groups (Larsen 2012; Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen 2002). Since then, groups within the RLLM have repeatedly been targeted in government efforts to counteract radical left "violent extremism" (Jämte and Ellefsen 2020a). In relation to the focus and title of this handbook, it can be noted that groups and networks that have been publicly labeled as left-wing extremist in Danish and Swedish PRVE policies (prevent radicalization and violent extremism) have been central actors in the RLLM (see, e.g., Jämte and Ellefsen 2020a; Larsen 2012).

This said, we refrain from using *extremism* as a designation. There is vagueness in the term and scholars disagree on whether it refers to beliefs or behaviors, or both.

March and Mudde (2005) distinguish radicals from extremists by arguing that while both strive for widespread social change, extremists oppose liberal democracy as an idea or system. Bötticher (2017) adds that unlike radicals, extremists see political violence against opponents as legitimate/desirable and oppose a society with pluralistic opinions. As there is no scholarly consensus on the meaning of extremism, but clearer ideas on what radicalism means, we prefer the latter term. By radical we mean actors with an ideological and practical orientation toward far-reaching systemic change. In this sense, the RLLM is clearly radical, but whether it opposes certain models of democracy or sees political violence as legitimate/desirable are questions that need to be answered empirically and also can change over time. As we will see in this chapter, the RLLM has used conventional, transgressive, as well as violent protest tactics, and the tendency to use one type over another often differs across time and contexts.

The chapter proceeds through five sections. Below, we briefly present the history of radical left movements in Scandinavia, 1880–1980. We then detail the data and methods that underpin the analysis. After the methods section, we analyze the contemporary history of the RLLM in Denmark and Sweden separately. We pay attention to changes in central ideas, organizational forms, and tactics. In the concluding section, we compare the two cases, finding great similarities in the two movements' developmental trajectories.

HISTORY OF THE RADICAL LEFT IN SCANDINAVIA

There are many similarities in the role, significance, and development of radical left movements in Scandinavian countries during the first half of the twentieth century. The labor movements that emerged in the late nineteenth century drew their inspiration from the Social Democratic Party in Germany, its mass organization, and its Marxist analysis of society. More radical actors emerged mainly from within social democratic parties. In the 1890s and 1900s, the Young Socialists within social democratic parties were inspired by anarchism and syndicalism, which contributed to the creation of anarcho-syndicalist trade unions around 1910. Only the Swedish syndicalist union, the Central Organization of the Workers of Sweden (Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation, SAC) still exists. During the 1920s and 1930s, SAC was seen as a serious competitor to the main social democratic trade union confederation LO, but then its importance declined (Persson 1990). In the same period, Communist parties with ties to Moscow that had splintered from social democratic parties in the 1910s became the largest, most influential radical left organizations. The social democratic parties and unions became central in the development of the “Nordic model,” characterized by close bonds between popular mass organizations and politics, and a political culture valuing negotiations between organized interests rather than competition and strife.

The Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary in 1956, the international influence of “new left” ideas, and the political turbulence of 1968 changed the landscape of radical left activism in Scandinavia. The traditional Communist parties were reformed or challenged by non-Communist radical left parties and organizations. The emergence of new social movements and the intense student protests of 1968, however, simultaneously spawned new groups and parties, often based in Leninism, Maoism, Trotskyism, and Stalinism (Ekman Jørgensen 2008; Östberg 2002). This created a new type of extra-parliamentary radical left throughout Scandinavia that questioned the consensus-oriented Nordic political model and its dominance by social democratic parties and the popular movement tradition. In Norway and Sweden, Maoist and Marxist-Leninist groups dominated the protest wave of the 1960s and 1970s. In Denmark, on the other hand, the movement was more strongly associated with countercultural currents, and especially with the squatter’s movement of Copenhagen. During the 1980s, revolutionary Communist groups lost their previous dominant role in the Scandinavian extra-parliamentary radical left, and countercultural groups grew in importance. The collapse of the State Socialist bloc further delegitimized political actors linked to Soviet-style Communism. Consequently, the subsequent sections will focus on the development of the one part of the radical left that never had such an ideological heritage: the RLLM.

EMPIRICAL CASES: THE RLLM IN DENMARK AND SWEDEN

The following sections present the development of RLLM activism in Denmark and Sweden between the early 1980s and the late 2010s. The historical narratives are structured as sequential time periods, building on a quantitative analysis of protest-event data and a qualitative analysis of activist interviews and written materials.³ The periodization highlights major changes in ideas, tactical repertoire, and organizational forms of the RLLM. We thereby consciously downplay the tensions and continuities that exist within each period.

Each section builds on a combination of secondary literature and original analysis of data collected primarily between 2012 and 2018. For Sweden, the periodization and historical narrative is based on previously published research (in particular, Jämte et al. 2020 and Jämte and Wennerhag 2019). For Denmark, the historical narrative combines previously published research with an analysis of interviews, protest-event data, and documents from the movement milieu. The protest-event data is based on events reported in RLLM websites and magazines in Sweden (1997–2016) and Denmark (1998–2015). The protest-event data set contains 3,836 events for Sweden and 840 for Denmark. While the Danish data set is not as detailed as its Swedish counterpart, it still allows us to trace and compare more general patterns of protest.⁴

As Fig. 16.1 shows, the protest-event data indicate similar RLLM protest patterns in the two countries. While the RLLMs in the two countries followed different trajectories with some overlap in the 1980s (which will be detailed in the following section), the movements came to gradually resemble each other in the 1990s. In the 2000s, protests peaked twice, once in the early 2000s and once in the mid-2000s. However, the protests in each country were directed at different targets (see Table 16.1). In Sweden, the movement primarily protested racism, fascism, and labor market issues. Feminist issues are also prominent in the Swedish data. In Denmark, on the other hand, protests concerning housing and city planning dominate the data, and there is little representation of labor market issues. As we discuss further below, these differences reveal the relatively close connections between the Swedish RLLM and the workers' movement (e.g., through SAC). In Denmark, on the other hand, the legacy of squatters and the alternative movement of the 1970s continued to characterize the movement well into the 2000s.

Beginning in the late 2000s, a prolonged period of decline in publicly visible protest is evident (see Fig. 16.1). From the 2010s and onward, a clear decrease in violent forms of protest (violence against objects and people, including nonviolent protests that turn violent) is also evident, in favor of conventional protest (actions that are confined to established institutional routines and norms) and in the Danish case also transgressive forms of protest (actions that challenge established routines and straddle illegitimacy and illegality).

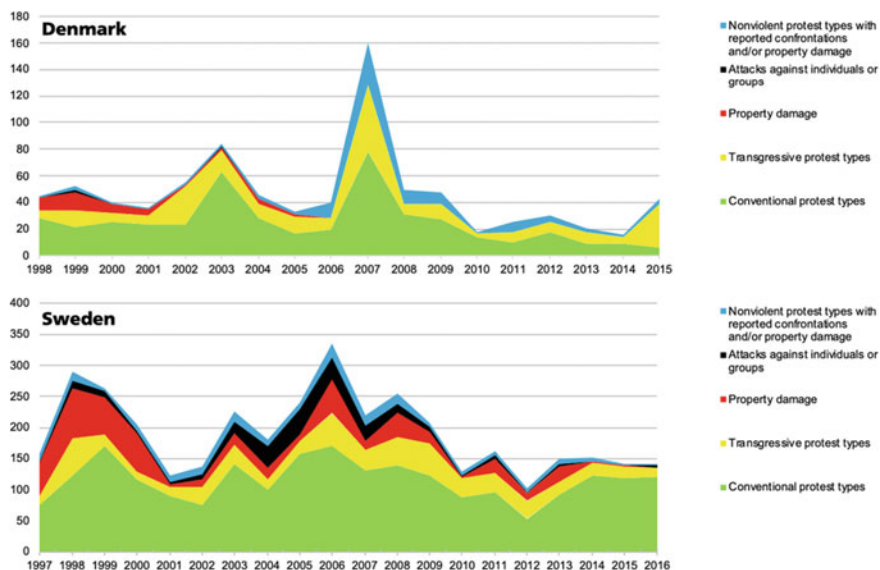


Fig. 16.1 Number of RLLM protest events per year in Denmark (1998–2015) and Sweden (1997–2016)

Table 16.1 RLLM protest issues in Denmark (1998–2015) and Sweden (1997–2016)

<i>Protest issues (%)</i>	<i>Denmark 1998–2015</i>		<i>Sweden 1997–2016</i>	
	<i>Total (%)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>	<i>Total (%)</i>	<i>Total (N)</i>
Housing/city planning	39	325	7	261
Racism/fascism	19	162	24	930
Labor market/workers' rights	1	12	18	703
Migration/immigration	9	72	6	226
May Day	5	39	9	337
Feminism/women's rights	3	27	8	324
War/military	9	72	2	86
State repression	7	55	3	123
Public welfare	0	3	5	191
Animal rights	1	5	3	129
Public transport	0	1	2	89
Other issues	8	67	11	437
Total (%)	100	–	100	–
Total (N)	840	840	3,836	3,836

This illustrates the movement's development from a militant countercultural network in the 1980s and 1990s, to increased openness and tactical pragmatism in the 2010s, a tendency that will be expanded on below.

Although this chapter focuses on similarities between the two countries and their movements, there are also differences that deserve comment. The frequency of protest events in Denmark is less consistent, with a clear peak in protests in 2006–2007 when the RLLM sought to defend the Youth House and Christiania in Copenhagen (see below). In Sweden, the frequency of protests is relatively consistent, and its decline in the 2010s is not very steep. The difference can be attributed to two interlinked factors. First, the considerably stronger organizational continuity in Sweden, as opposed to the Danish movement's reliance on specific places/spaces and campaign-specific initiatives, and second, the wider geographical reach of the Swedish movement. Whereas the story of the Danish RLLM is mainly the story of the Copenhagen milieu, the center of activity for the Swedish movement shifted between cities and regions across time. Hence, when the level of activity was low in one area, the movement's overall level of activity did not necessarily decline.

RLLM in Denmark, 1980–2020

Since the 1970s, Denmark, and Copenhagen in particular, has been a center of RLLM activism. This is not primarily because of strong RLLM organizations, but rather for lasting movement infrastructures and the possibilities to retain a lifestyle based on left-libertarian principles and ideals (Ekman Jørgensen 2008; Hare 2009). In this endeavor, the establishment and longevity of a range of social centers and “autonomous spaces” have played a pivotal role in RLLM activity. These have provided the RLLM with an infrastructure that has made it possible for activists to build a collective identity and engage in activism through phases of more or less intense activism. These phases can be roughly divided into five time periods, characterized by differences in protest issues, ideational currents, and changes in tactical preferences.

1980–1990: A Movement on the Offense

In the early 1980s, a wave of youth revolts swept Northwest Europe, in particular West Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark. In relation to the more ideologically driven left-wing mobilization of the 1960s and 1970s, the revolts of the 1980s were focused on specific goals, tactics, and issues, as well as a dismissal of institutionalized politics and an emphasis on practice and direct action (Andresen and van der Steen 2016). In Denmark, this tendency was most clearly manifested through the so-called *BZ movement*, a name derived from the Danish word for “squatters” (*Besættelse*). In the early to mid-1980s, the BZ movement initiated a wave of occupation of houses, leading to the establishment of several autonomous social centers mainly in central Copenhagen, among them the important locale the Youth House (Ungdomshuset) in 1982, but also a range of other squats (Karpantschov and Mikkelsen 2014;

Mikkelsen and Karpantschof 2001). The social centers allowed activists to experiment with alternative ways of living and served as organizational hubs for activism.

The BZ did not have a distinct ideological basis. The movement emphasized practice, manifested in cultural expressions, protest events, and activists' social relations (Andresen and van der Steen 2016; Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2009). Besides occupying houses, the activists clashed with racist and nationalist groups, protested against police and domestic politicians, and carried out actions against foreign embassies, banks, and multinational corporations seen as representatives of capitalism, imperialism, or apartheid. BZ, thereby, functioned as the radical flank to several other social movements, for example, the environmental, anti-racist, and anti-apartheid movements (Meisner 2012; Mikkelsen and Karpantschof 2001).

The movement's attempts to expand and defend its occupied spaces led to escalating confrontations with the police. The struggle was eventually lost, leading to the eviction of many of the squats. Having lost many of its central meeting places and becoming more and more politically isolated, the BZ movement was fragmented and adrift by the turn of the 1990s (Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2014).

1990–2000: A Broadened Political Focus

In the early 1990s, the BZ gradually transformed into *de Autonome* (the Autonomous movement), a name borrowed from a similar movement in West Germany. The Autonomous movement comprised a heterogeneous network of activist groups bound together by a strong countercultural identity, the use of direct-action tactics, and a theoretical basis that emphasized the interconnectedness of different forms of structural oppression. While maintaining the legacy of militant protest from the 1980s, the Autonomous movement had a broad political focus and sought to re-establish the connection to other parts of the left that were fragmented by the end of the BZ era. The activists engaged in a wide range of issues: anti-racism, anti-EU and environmental issues, urban politics and feminism, and solidarity with political prisoners and international revolutionary movements (Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2014; Meisner 2012). Notably, a wave of violent far-right activism, such as the bombing of the office of the International Socialists (Internationale Sozialister) in 1992, fueled a new focus on anti-fascism (Karpantschof and Mikkelsen 2014).

The development of the Autonomous movement led to a range of new organizations and platforms. The early 1990s saw the creation of issue-specific groups, such as Anti-Fascist Action (Anti-fascistisk aktion, AFA) and politically broader youth organizations such as Rebel. The movement also sought broad collaboration and developed strategies to spread their ideas beyond the radical left. This is evident in the proliferation of movement magazines, books and posters, activist-run TV stations, concerts, cafés, and meeting places, which all played important roles for the milieu in the 1990s (Karpantschof and

Mikkelsen 2002; Meisner 2012). Many of the activities were based on conventional protest tactics, but the movement also used violence, including property damage and confrontations with far-right activists and police. The level of conflict culminated in 1993 during a protest against an EU referendum, which resulted in severe injuries of activists and law enforcement. During the riots police fired at protestors, wounding more than 10 activists (Karpantschhof and Mikkelsen 2014).

By the end of the decade, the Autonomous movement had become increasingly fragmented (Karpantschhof and Mikkelsen 2009). The breadth of focus and close collaboration with the broader left blurred the lines between different types of left-wing actors, and its unique “partisan profile” was partly lost (Mikkelsen and Karpantschhof 2001). Interviewees described how the movement went through a generational shift and a sense of burnout within the milieu. The movement experienced a period of stagnation, which can also be seen in the comparably low number of protest events in the late 1990s (see Fig. 16.1; see also Mikkelsen 2018).

2000–2005: Connecting the Global and the Local

In the early 2000s, the RLLM joined the protest wave of the global justice movement (GJM). The counterdemonstrations that the GJM organized against summit meetings of international institutions like the EU, WTO, and IMF provided activists in the RLLM with new possibilities to engage in struggles on a global scale. Following Danish involvement in the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, RLLM networks involved in the GJM also took part in organizing anti-war protests in 2003 that mobilized tens of thousands (see Fig. 16.1). In addition to peaceful demonstrations, the protests also consisted of civil disobedience and direct action, much of which involved the RLLM (Meisner 2012).

The GJM helped to diffuse new ideas and tactics, introducing new concepts and strategies into the RLLM. In Denmark several new networks and organizations formed, including The Anarchist Federation (Den Anarkistiske Føderation, AF) and Global Roots (Globale Rødder, GR), which both mobilized extensively for the EU summit in Copenhagen in 2002. While AF carried on the legacy of the Autonomous movement of the 1990s, GR represented a shift in the RLLM. Activists wanted to create an alternative to what was seen as a reactive, countercultural, and non-theoretical autonomous movement, which had become an easy target for state repression. The goal was to create a movement that was more inclusive, less violent, and more communicative, while still unruly and confrontational (Meisner 2012).

As the GJM and the peace movement declined in the mid-2000s, interviews show how Danish activists became interested in how to engage their everyday environment more—local communities, workplaces, and schools—questioning life and work in contemporary capitalism. The international influences of, and networks built, in the GJM made it possible for activists to connect to parallel local struggles in other countries. There was an upsurge in Reclaim the Streets

protests, which had begun already in the 1990s, and EuroMayDay demonstrations in the mid-2000s. The EuroMayDay mobilizations, which originated in Italy, coordinated transnational protests on May 1 using the same slogans in several European cities. Connecting global economic developments and local struggles, the focus was on the precarization of youth, the exploitation and persecution of migrants in Europe, increased minimum wage, and LGBTQ rights.

The 2000s also brought multiple changes to the Danish political landscape. The 2001 national elections were won by a coalition of conservatives and liberals supported by the right-wing populist Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti, DPP). The change in government marked a new era of political struggle for many of the activists who had been part of the Autonomous movement of the 1990s. Many activists saw DPP's influence as part of a broad societal and political turn to the right that also included mainstream parties and the media. The right-wing government also launched a policy of "normalization," signaling less tolerance of autonomous zones in Denmark, especially Christiania (Karpantschov and Mikkelsen 2014; Thörn et al. 2011). Activists interpreted these events as political threats to societal diversity, the existence of the movement's infrastructure, and in the long run, the movement itself. As the right-wing government also passed a series of laws that enhanced the power and rights of the police (see Karpantschov and Mikkelsen 2008), a sense of threat was heightened, leading to increased protests against what activists described as a police-state, state terrorism, and the gradual move toward a surveillance society.

In sum, the third period is marked by the wide range of foci of the RLLM, from local housing and far-right organizations, to national and international issues concerning global justice, migration, and war. The period is characterized by the activists' efforts to connect global and local struggles. This said, the protest-event data indicate that the targets of protest were often international and supra-national institutions, multi- and transnational corporations, as well as the Danish government. During this period, segments of the movement worked to make the movement more inclusive than it had been in the 1980s and 1990s, downplaying militant street activism in favor of nonviolent mass action. This led to an increasing number of coalitions and co-staged protests, where activists worked together with the left, green, and feminist movements in mobilizing against the war on terror or for global justice.

2006–2010: Defending the Movement

The international focus that had characterized many of the protests in the early 2000s took a decisively local and countercultural turn by the mid-2000s. Since the late 1990s, RLLM activists and the municipality of Copenhagen had been in conflict over the status of the Youth House, the symbolic stronghold of the BZ and the subsequent Autonomous movement. In 1999, politicians decided to sell the house, a decision that was brought into action by the mid-2000s. The threat of eviction caused a surge in movement activities. During

2006 and 2007, thousands of protestors engaged in over two hundred protest events, most of them peaceful, but some violent. The conflicts also spread to Christiania, with Youth House activists joining “Christianitters” to defend the area from police raids and the politics of “normalization” (see above). The wave of protests radicalized the movement, and during 2006–2007 over 2,500 activists were arrested (Karpantschov 2009). In March 2007, the Danish anti-terrorist unit evicted the Youth house. As a direct consequence, thousands of activists clashed with the police during three days of riots, which have been described as among the largest and most violent events in Danish post-war history (*ibid.*).

Even though the Youth House was lost, the struggle for new autonomous spaces continued throughout 2007 and into 2008, reinvigorating the RLLM. After the demolition of the Youth House, activists began a campaign of innovative and mostly peaceful activity: concerts, cultural events, folk-kitchens, parties, and protest events. Several of these mobilizations drew hundreds, some even thousands of activists. One illustrating example is G13, a preannounced, nonviolent mass squatting action for a new youth house, which illustrate how the experiences and practices of the GJM interconnected with the local struggle of the Youth House, leading to new ideas and repertoires of action. After G13 and activists threat to blockade the city-hall in Copenhagen, activists and local politicians negotiated the establishment of a new youth house on the outskirts of central Copenhagen.

In 2008 and 2009, the struggle against increasingly restrictive immigration laws came into focus, targeting the right-wing government and its supporting party DPP. For instance, in 2008 around 2,000 activists gathered to symbolically cut down the outer fence of a camp for asylum seekers, and in 2009 many activists took part in the “Kirkeasyl” campaign to halt the deportation of Iraqi and Kurdish refugees who had found shelter in a church in central Copenhagen. The police response became violent, and in the end the refugees were deported. As a consequence, 25,000 protestors gathered for one of the largest anti-racist demonstrations in Danish history (Brix and Brekke 2011; Skriver and Tved 2011). RLLM’s increased engagement in immigration issues led to even closer connections and collaborations with actors in institutionalized politics, in particular with the radical left party Red-Green Alliance (Enhedslisten, RGA).

The same year (2009), the United Nations held its 15th annual climate change conference in Copenhagen (COP15). Tens of thousands of protestors from all over the world gathered in the Danish capital, marking one of the biggest demonstrations in Danish history. RLLM activists planned for nonviolent direct action, but because of a massive police presence and repression during the meeting—with over 2,000 so-called preventive arrests—they were unable to realize most of their plans. Activists described the meeting as a disappointment, and after the developments surrounding the Youth House, Kirkeasyl, and COP15, many activists were exhausted and demoralized, and

the movement became significantly less visible (Karpantschov and Mikkelsen 2014).

2010–2020: A Fragmented Milieu

During the fifth period, it is harder to find common denominators and clear movement narratives. There was less public activity than in previous periods, and few extended campaigns. The resurgence of a mobilized street-level far right in the mid-2010s, embodied by the Danish Defense League, Pegida, and Party of the Danes (Danskernes parti), reinvigorated the movement somewhat, but the breadth and scope of its actions were narrow compared to other periods.

Analyses of interviews and protest-event data make it possible to distinguish three tendencies among the Danish activists in this period. First, with the disappearance of the movement's traditional meeting places, some activists stressed the need to form stronger organizations. For instance, these included Libertarian Socialists (Libertære Socialister, LS) and new anti-fascist and anti-racist actions groups such as Revolutionary Antifascists (Revolutionære Antifascister). Second, activists emphasized the need to engage with politics at the micro-level. Some activists withdrew from the public sphere to rebuild the movement's structures. Ideals of self-organizing, self-schooling, collective living, and mutual aid once again became central. However, instead of occupying and defending autonomous zones, activists worked to establish long-lasting and local alternatives, which were not constantly threatened by the state or police. One example is activities surrounding the self-organized Folkets Hus (People's House) in Copenhagen, an important node for segments of the RLLM since the 1980s. During the 2010s, the People's house gravitated toward social and community work, and the connection to local government was strengthened. Third, activists chose to leave the extra-parliamentary arena and become involved in established civil society organizations or left, green, and feminist political parties. The electoral success of the RGA (6.7% in the national elections of 2011, 7.8% in 2015, 6.9% in 2019, and 5.1% in 2022) provided activists with opportunities to continue their political struggle from within institutionalized politics. In the 2021 Copenhagen municipal elections, the RGA gained 24.6% of the vote, making them the largest party in the city council.

The trends outlined above contributed to a general withdrawal from the streets and less public presence for the RLLM. Specific events, such as May Day marches or the commemoration of the eviction of the Youth House, still draw thousands of participants and are important to uphold a sense of "we-ness" within the RLLM. When activists do take to the streets, it is often in coalitions, mainly in relation to issues concerning war, immigration, racism, and fascism (see Table 16.1). These developments have also been noted in recent reports on violent extremism in Denmark (Larsen 2019). There, the RLLM (or the "anarchist inspired milieu" as it is referred to there) is described

as fragmented, ideologically incoherent, and undergoing a general crisis, with shrinking activity and few remaining organized groups.

The Radical Left-Libertarian Movement in Sweden

Unlike in Denmark, Maoist and Leninist groups continued to dominate the Swedish radical left-wing movement throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. More libertarian interpretations of left-wing thought were expressed primarily in the so-called alternative movement and in brief waves of squatting (see Polanska and Wåg 2019; Stahre 2014). Although the alternative movement made use of direct action and civil disobedience, neither of these involved violent protest tactics or led to major confrontations with the police. Toward the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, however, the RLLM became the most vital type of extra-parliamentary left-wing activism in Sweden and came to resemble its more conflict-oriented counterparts in continental Europe (Jämte and Sörbom 2016). From this point, the history of the Swedish RLLM can be roughly divided into four time periods, each consisting of specific ideational and tactical trends (for elaboration on these phases, see Jämte et al. 2020).

1984–1990: An Incipient Movement

In the mid-1980s, a new generation of activists reinvigorated Swedish RLLM activism. Some had been involved in cultural centers, anarchist associations, and the anarchist journal *Brand*. Many also came from the punk scene, which had become increasingly politicized in the 1980s. As activists engaged RLLM milieus in Copenhagen, West Germany, and elsewhere, they imported new ideas and tactics into the Swedish setting. The increased interest in radical left-libertarianism also reinvigorated the anarcho-syndicalist union SAC. For instance, since the early 1980s, its May Day march in Stockholm has remained the city's third largest behind those of the Social Democrats and the Left party (Jämte et al. forthcoming).

As in Copenhagen, albeit to a lesser extent, Swedish activists combined squatting in empty buildings with cultural activities and direct-action activism against multinational corporations and international representatives of imperialism, capitalism, and apartheid regimes. In 1987, one of the most active years in the incipient phase, the Swedish security police (SÄPO) noted that activists from the RLLM participated in “riot-like demonstrations against Nancy Reagan’s visit [to Stockholm], vandalism of McDonald’s restaurants, and sabotage of Shell’s petrol stations” (Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen 2002: 330). Starting as early as 1984, activists in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Umeå, and elsewhere squatted in multiple houses, which they used, or intended to use, for housing and as cultural venues (Jämte and Sörbom 2016).

In the 1980s, the reinvigorated Swedish RLLM defined itself in stark opposition to the Marxist-Leninist radical left and the “old” left of the political mainstream. The movement maintained the horizontal structures and

consensus-oriented decision-making of the alternative movement, and activists criticized the traditional left-wing emphasis on employment and workers' issues. Writers in outlets like *Brand* argued for freedom from work and for the expansion of individual and collective freedoms, to be achieved through direct-action activism and prefigurative politics within informal collectives (Jämte and Sörbom 2016).

The Swedish state's initial reaction to the incipient RLLM resembled how it had reacted to more confrontational types of activism in the 1960s and 1970s, combining surveillance with negotiation and partial concessions. However, a transformation of this approach became particularly visible in relation to squatting. In 1984 and 1986, activists legalized multiple squats in Umeå and Gothenburg, following negotiations with local government authorities and property owners. Soon, however, Swedish state agencies, particularly the police, became nervous that Danish BZ culture would spread to Sweden. In the late 1980s, police agencies and activists were locked in an escalating conflict in which local authorities' and the police's willingness and capacity to evict squatters grew dramatically. Following several dramatic evictions, activists concluded that squatting had become impossible in Sweden. The developments led many activists to abandon the attempts of occupying new houses and, instead, focus their attention on other political issues (Jämte 2013; Polanska 2019).

1991–2001: Expansion, Counterculture, and Direct Action

The activist circles around the cultural centers and occupied houses of the 1980s eventually developed into a large, highly political libertarian left-wing counterculture, drawing together left-leaning activists, anarchist and anarcho-syndicalists with radical anti-racist activists, anarcha-feminists, animal rights activists, and others. Coordinated mainly through cultural events, joint protest events and direct-action reports in movement-based magazines, local fanzines, and off- and online newsletters, activists used vandalism and sabotage, as well as civil disobedience and more conventional modes of protest (e.g., demonstrations, rallies) to target the growing far right and its infrastructure, animal testing and the fur industry, pornography, and sexist advertisements, etc. Activists also targeted multinational corporations (Shell and McDonalds in particular) and international government representatives seen as representatives of global capitalism and oppression. Ideologically, many groups had a common point of reference in the so-called triple oppression theory, noting the interconnectedness of different forms of social stratification and oppression based on gender, class, ethnicity, and more (Jämte 2013).

The countercultural milieu blurred the boundaries between the RLLM and the wider Swedish left. It influenced ideological development, introduced new, more conflict-oriented tactics, and formed new organizations and coalitions. It greatly expanded the reach of some of the RLLM's main outlets—not least *Brand* and *Motkraft*—and it allowed for the creation of a vibrant movement infrastructure consisting of cultural venues, meeting places, and print

and online publications. It also created a large network in which the participants engaged in civil disobedience, confrontational demonstrations, and direct action.

While RLLM activists were active in various protest issues, anti-fascism was arguably the central struggle in the 1990s. At the time, Sweden had some of the largest far-right movements in Europe, including skinhead and neo-Nazi organizations, growing far-right parties, as well as a world-leading white power music business (Lööv 2000). Throughout the decade, RLLM activists organized vigils, demonstrations, and rallies, as well as confrontational counterdemonstrations, sabotage, and attacks on far-right activists. The violent far-right protest culminated in multiple murders and attempted murders of journalists, anti-racists, and police in 1999. The far-right movement crumbled under intensive pressure from the media, state actors, and the anti-fascist movement. While anti-fascism, as a frame and a protest issue, remained a crucial part of the RLLM's repertoire throughout the 2000s and 2010s, it gradually lost the central role it had in the 1990s.

While much activism in the 1990s occurred within informal network structures, the RLLM also began to form more durable organizations. The most durable were Anti-Fascist Action (AFA) and the Swedish Anarcho-Syndicalist Youth Federation (Syndikalistiska ungdomsförbundet, SUF), both founded in 1993. AFA first became visible through a series of highly confrontational anti-fascist counterdemonstrations in Stockholm and Lund, in which activists outmaneuvered the police in ways that were unprecedented in Sweden (Brink-Pinto and Pries 2013; Jämte 2013). In comparison to AFA, SUF was a generalist, public-facing organization. Focusing on anti-capitalism and labor issues, SUF addressed students' and workers' rights, international solidarity politics, etc. Together with the SAC, AFA and SUF would remain the two most important organizational nodes in the Swedish RLLM for the following two decades, with chapters across the country.

In the late 1990s, the Swedish RLLM drew new inspiration from the international movement environment. Among these was the "reclaim the streets" concept, which had been developing among European activists throughout the decade. The movement was also swept up in the GJM. Around the turn of the millennium, activists participated in international summit protests, drew on new ideological influences, and formed new organizational structures. When Sweden hosted the EU presidency in 2001, with summits across the country, the RLLM and the wider left-wing environment organized protests that were similar to those previously organized in other parts of Europe and the US.

Confrontations between the police and the RLLM grew increasingly violent throughout the 1990s. Many of these clashes had taken place during protests against the far right, but by the end of the decade violent clashes also erupted in relation to many other forms of protests. For instance, in 1998, a May Day rally in Malmö resulted in riots and confrontations between activists and the police, and in 2000, multiple activists and police were injured during the eviction of squatters from a Linköping building. In 2001, the EU summit

in Gothenburg resulted in riots, extensive damage, and injuries of activists and law enforcement. During the latter confrontations, state authorities shot at protesters for the first time since 1931, wounding three. The protest in Gothenburg was particularly intense, leading to historically severe punishments for some of the activists and contributed to the stigmatization of several of its main organizations, in particular AFA, which retreated to a less public role (Jämte 2013).

2002–2009: The Everyday and Invisible Resistance of the Working Class

The aftermath of the 2001 riots was immediately visible in developments in the RLLM. With many activists injured, jailed, or disillusioned, the movement's overall level of activity briefly dropped. RLLM activists used the first years of the 2000s to identify new tactics and frames (Jacobsson and Sörbom 2015). This resulted in an emphasis on “everyday” issues connected to the workplace and the activists' daily lives.

The emphasis on everyday issues characterized the RLLM's approach throughout the 2000s. The decade saw the RLLM's growing participation in workplace blockades, nonviolent and violent protests against center-right parties and politicians, and a return to questioning urban development. As workplace struggles became more central to the movement, many activists turned to traditional unionizing, either within the SAC or in other trade unions. However, they also promoted non-union forms of workplace struggle, such as absenteeism, sabotage, and workplace theft, as well as the politicization of workplace culture. Ideologically, these and other “workerist” concepts drew heavily on the growing influence of Italian autonomist Marxism, which had a big impact on the movement (Piotrowski and Wennerhag 2015).

In 2006, the “invisible party” campaign combined the direct-action tactics of the 1990s with workerist concepts and protest issues. Organized before the 2006 national elections, the invisible party campaign was intended to mobilize popular opposition to Swedish labor market policy (and, by extension, against capitalism) through unclaimed demonstrations, vandalism, sabotage, and workplace actions. Hence, whereas segments of the movement turned toward traditional unionization and other forms of organizing, some activists emphasized looser forms of association. Both, however, were presented as ways of rooting RLLM activism in the immediate experience of the *worker*, rather than in the abstract, distant goals of the *activist* (Jacobsson and Sörbom 2015).

Despite the turn toward everyday life and the increasing emphasis on the activists' worker identities, many “old” organizational forms, tactics, and frames were carried through from the 1990s. The most important organizations of the 1990s remained central to the movement, in particular SUF (through the new emphasis on workplace struggles) and AFA. In addition to these groups, the newly founded Revolutionary Front (Revolutionära fronten, RF) introduced a highly confrontational tactical repertoire, manifested primarily through attacks on far-right activists. In the first half of the

2000s, counterprotests against the annual far-right “Salem march” were the largest RLLM protest events in terms of participants, and they often erupted in confrontations between activists, police, and the far right (Jämte 2013). In the same period, some anti-racist and anti-fascist activists turned toward asylum, migration, and no-border activism, particularly visible in the organization No One is Illegal (Ingen människa är illegal, IMÄI). In the latter case, RLLM activists found themselves in a new movement context, cooperating with religious organizations and moderate groups (cf. Kleres 2018). Working with and for undocumented migrants, activists also turned away from traditional protest toward “invisible” practices of service provision and personal aid.

The turn toward everyday life did not mean a complete rejection of the legacy of the GJM. RLLM organizations mobilized actively for anti-war demonstrations prior to the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and many activists participated in the 2009 protests during the COP15 climate summit in Copenhagen. As described for the Danish case, the protests in Copenhagen were met with heavy repression, and in the aftermath, many felt disillusioned regarding the effectiveness of mass protests to further the movement’s goals.

2010s: Pragmatism and Fragmentation

Toward the end of the 2000s, the external conditions for Swedish RLLM activism changed rapidly. First, the countercultural environment in which the movement was embedded during the 1990s and early 2000s disappeared. Second, the movement’s “traditional” opponents on the far right went through two closely interlinked changes: the decline of street-level neo-Nazism and the massive strengthening and political institutionalization of the far-right party the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna, SD). In this context, the pragmatic strategies of the 2000s, which introduced inclusive and less directly confrontational tactics, grew increasingly central (Jacobsson and Sörbom 2015; Jämte et al. 2020).

The pragmatic turn was directly visible in the national squatting campaign of 2008. Rather than using occupation to draw out confrontations with the police or create free spaces for the movement participants, the 2008 campaign directly addressed outsiders to the movement. The campaign materials were colorful, the occupied houses were (often) open to the public, and the squatters’ tactics were based on the principle of confrontational nonviolence. Dissimilar to the campaigns in the late 1980s and many of the intermittent occupations that had occurred since, the campaign did not lead to any serious physical confrontations with the police (Polanska and Wåg 2019).

Beginning in the late 2000s, anti-fascism also took new forms (Jämte 2017). Owing in part to the entrance of the right-wing populist Sweden Democrats into the national parliament in September 2010, an event that mobilized thousands of anti-racist activists across the political spectrum, activists struck alliances with political actors outside of left-wing organizations. The confrontational anti-fascism of the 1990s and 2000s was questioned,

leading to an increasingly diverse protest repertoire (Jämte 2017). While confrontations with the far right and police still happened, they were less extensive than they had been in the 1990s and 2000s. The confrontations that did occur were almost completely restricted to the election rallies of the neo-Nazi parties Party of the Swedes (Svenskarnas parti) and the Nordic Resistance Movement (Nordiska motståndsrörelsen). In fact, these events were among the few times when the RLLM used violence during the 2010s, a time when violent confrontations decreased overall. At the same time, the principled acceptance of violent and confrontational tactics remained a core part of the movement's collective identity (Flaherty 2022).

Rather than present itself as a movement of workers struggling for their own sake, activists in the 2010s presented themselves as locals and as organizers who could, and should, help others mobilize (Jämte et al. 2020). For instance, the RLLM placed considerable emphasis on neighborhood organizing as an alternative to the movement's other modes of approaching urban development and gentrification. However, it also coincided with participation in a broad range of activities, focusing on anti-racist campaigns, demonstrations and actions on health care and welfare, and mobilization alongside migrants (see, e.g., Hansen 2019). This development coincided with the founding of Everything for Everyone (Allt åt alla, AÅA) in the late 2000s. AÅA emphasized a pragmatic approach to coalition building with an emphasis on local and urban politics. However, some groups of activists within the RLLM, dissatisfied with the dominant, pragmatic approach, attempted to maintain older forms of direct-action activism, for example, vandalizing the properties of private companies and organizing through informal associations.

The 2010s saw changes in the RLLM's organizational structures. AFA maintained the more clandestine structures that it had adopted in the early 2000s but with less activities and fewer local groups, and SUF decreased its activity as well as its number of local chapters. Following massive police repression, RF disbanded in 2015. Even though several RLLM organizations and activists played an important role in the so-called "refugee crisis" of 2015, when over 160,000 refugees sought asylum in Sweden, the general response to the crisis saw more moderate actors gain prominence (Jämte and Pitti 2019). Coinciding with the general turn toward local politics and grassroots organizing, many activists created or joined other types of networks, for example, neighborhood organizations and place-based campaign initiatives. In Stockholm's suburbs in particular, activists developed campaigns and organizations that combined anti-racism, migrant solidarity, and protest against urban development in the context of racialized housing inequality and gentrification. In this sense, the RLLM has become more scattered and simultaneously less visible, as its activists entered networks and associations that cannot so easily be affiliated with a particular movement.

Coinciding with the pragmatic phase are changes in patterns of state repression. On one hand, the state's repressive capacity increased, with new methods of protest policing and new legislation against attacks on police. On the

other hand, the labeling and stigmatizing practices of contemporary policies to counter violent extremism (CVE) have made some activists hesitant to be open about their involvement in several of the most prominent RLLM organizations (Jämte and Ellefsen 2020a). That said, while parts of the RLLM are still labeled and targeted as extremists in national policy, local CVE front-line practitioners rarely experience the movement as an active and prevalent threat at the local level. Instead, the focus of local CVE work is primarily directed toward right-wing extremists and, in some cities, Islamist extremism (Jämte and Ellefsen 2020b; Jämte and Wennerhag 2019).

ANALYSIS

Despite different starting points, the Swedish and Danish RLLMs have developed in strikingly similar ways since the late 1980s. Building on a stronger left-libertarian tradition and close connection to developments in continental Europe, the Danish RLLM was central to the European youth revolts of the 1980s. In Sweden, similar trends emerged during the second half of the decade. From the mid- to late 1980s, both movements took part in direct-action activism focused on international solidarity, feminism, environmentalism, and, in particular, squatting and urban development. Following growing police repression against squatters and escalated conflicts with the far right, the 1990s saw both movements shift into an anti-fascism mode, combining broad and nonviolent demonstrations with violent confrontations with far-right activists and property damage. In Sweden and Denmark, this occurred in the context of a broad countercultural activist milieu, which would eventually be swept up in the GJM of the early 2000s. Owing to (different) experiences of police repression and the decline of the countercultural milieu, activists in the 2000s turned toward issues more closely related to work, neighborhoods, and everyday life. In Denmark, the movement was increasingly caught up in conflicts surrounding the Youth House and Christiania, while in Sweden, this development coincided with a considerable involvement in union and labor market politics. In the 2010s, growing engagement with local issues and changes in the movement's organizational structure meant activists became increasingly less visible. In general, an intentional effort to move from a reactive to a proactive stance meant that the movement in both countries increasingly emphasized the need to set an independent agenda and organize its own initiatives, rather than planning activities in reaction to the moves of adversaries.

The larger pattern runs parallel to a gradual shift in tactical preferences across the periods, from the highly confrontational direct-action style of protest, with many violent events, that characterized the 1980s up until the mid-2000s, to more inclusive, open, and nonviolent protest by the late 2000s and 2010s. The use of violent tactics in later years or protests escalating into violence mainly occurred in the context of anti-fascist demonstrations. Over time, these general developments have led to a diminishing gap between the

RLLM, the “traditional” left, other progressive social movements, and political parties.

In order to better understand the similar development of the movements, we argue it is necessary to look at four factors: (1) movement-internal developments, (2) changes in the countercultural milieus surrounding the movements, (3) the political institutionalization of the far right, and (4) new patterns of state repression and protest policing.

First, ideas and tactics have always traveled between the Swedish and Danish RLLM movements, fueling different types of movement-internal developments. In the late 1980s, the Danish BZ scene had a great impact on the development of RLLM activism in Sweden. This influence persisted throughout much of the 1990s, as Danish and Swedish activists drew on many of the same core ideas, protested similar issues (often traveling across borders to aid each other’s cause) and gradually also did so in similar ways, as repertoires of action were diffused throughout the two countries. While the movements followed somewhat different trajectories during the 2000s, with the Danish RLLM emphasizing the GJM and the struggle concerning the Youth House and the Swedish movement being heavily influenced by work-rist ideas and workplace and union struggles, the direction of influence had shifted by the late 2000s. Having lost much of their movement infrastructure, Danish activists expressed a desire to adopt Swedish organizational models and the Swedish emphasis on everyday struggles.

Second, in both countries, the countercultural milieus that played such an important role for the movements in the 1980s and 1990s virtually disappeared during the 2000s. In the 1990s in particular, this broader environment served as an important entry point for many new activists, legitimized the RLLM, and helped to disseminate activism beyond the movement’s networks and organizations. While the decline of the counterculture can be observed across many movements and countries, this general process was in part accelerated by activists’ questioning of a subcultural “activist identity,” as well as attempts to gain access to, and collaborate with, new actors in the workplace, schools, neighborhoods, and so on. In these contexts, the RLLM also had more contact with new allies, political norms, and protest issues.

Third, the movements’ clearest and most persistent historical counterpart, the far right, has changed considerably since the 1980s. Right-wing populist and radical nationalist parties have grown and become increasingly influential, while street-level, far-right activism has become significantly weaker. The latter development is also associated with the decline of the far-right skinhead movement. Particularly evident in Sweden, this development has been central to the de-escalation of anti-fascist tactics and in the declining dominance of anti-fascist organizations, frames, and tactics in the RLLM. In Denmark, many activists have attempted to follow the far right into political institutions, particularly through the RGA. In Sweden, activists have maintained predominantly extra-parliamentary strategies, combining the “old” style of anti-fascism

against the remaining far right with neighborhood organizing tactics and ideological resistance.

Fourth, RLLM movements in Denmark and Sweden have experienced similar changes in the state's capacity and willingness to police, repress, and sentence politically motivated criminality. Indeed, many of the ideational and tactical changes that the movements went through between the late 1980s and the 2010s were connected to the escalation of policing and repression or to the use of new policing instruments. This is, for instance, evident in the shift away from squatting in the late 1980s and in the emergence of confrontational but nonviolent forms of street protests in the 2000s. During the 2010s, the state's emphasis on soft forms of repression increased with the breakthrough of policies that counter so-called violent extremism through labeling and stigmatization of certain groups (Jämte and Ellefsen 2020a, b). In both countries, organizations central to the RLLM have been targeted, including clandestine and militant groups as well as those that mobilize inclusively and openly, using primarily conventional protest tactics. For the latter groups, the labeling and associated stigma has presented new challenges, as it affects their mobilizing potential in surrounding society (Jämte and Ellefsen 2020a).

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In Sweden and Denmark, the past four decades have seen left-libertarian tendencies dominate radical left activism. Emerging out of the changing political landscape of the early 1980s, RLLM actors in both countries introduced new repertoires of action, new ideas, and new organizational forms into their respective countries' political landscapes. Tracing similar histories, the movements developed from direct-action networks focusing on a variety of political issues—anti-fascism, anti-imperialism, feminism, animal rights, etc.—to more “conventional” networks of organizations and initiatives that intervened in local politics and in neighborhood and workplace conflicts. The same period has also seen the RLLM grow less confrontational and violent in its tactics. This general development can partly be explained as the result of movement-internal developments, but it also reflects wider changes in the political landscape, the diminishing of broadly left-leaning activist milieus, changing methods of protest policing and police repression, and the political institutionalization of the organized far right.

The historical comparison of the Swedish and Danish RLLM suggests several potential lines for future research. First, the historical comparison should be extended backwards, helping us see continuities and discontinuities between different strands of the radical left during the post-war era. Second, the two cases pose intriguing theoretical and empirical questions about the causes, conditions, and mechanisms that make movements diminish or even disappear, and the factors that allow them to resume after a period of reduced activity.

The coming years will show if and how the RLLM will adapt to a changing political landscape and to the consequences of the movement's own internal development. The mainstreaming and growing political influence of the far right, the growing salience and polarization between authoritarian and nationalist versus libertarian and cosmopolitan ideals in the political discourse, and the re-emergence of the environmental movement are all affecting the conditions for radical left-libertarian activism, opening some opportunities while closing others. In a context where the RLLM has indisputably grown less publicly visible, it remains an open question whether the current challenges and opportunities will re-activate older activists (and in what ways), if a new generation of activists will emerge in their place, or if the movement's decline will continue.

NOTES

1. The term RLLM encompasses organizations, informal groups, and networks that base their activism in various strands of libertarian socialist thought, such as anarchism and anarcho-syndicalism, council Communism, autonomist Marxism, and other forms of libertarian Marxism. Throughout their history, RLLM actors have also criticized power relations not necessarily connected to capitalism or the state, for instance racism, sexism, homophobia, and speciesism. RLLM actors envision a society based on direct or participatory democratic ideals and seek social change through the decentralization of power.
2. The third Scandinavian country, Norway, has also had a vibrant radical left milieu. In Norway, the extra-parliamentary radical left of the 1970s was predominantly Maoist. In the 1980s, an undercurrent of RLLM groups gained visibility through riotous demonstrations in Oslo and squatting actions. Many of the latter led to the founding and legalization of lasting cultural centers in Trondheim, Oslo, and elsewhere. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the focus shifted to the struggle against the violent farright subculture. While little research has been published on the RLLM Norway, readers can consult, e.g., Ekman Jørgensen (2008) and Helle & Matos (2018).
3. Method and data are discussed in detail in Jämte et al. (2020), Jämte (2017), and Wennerhag et al. (2018).
4. One difference between the datasets is a likely underreporting in Danish movement media of property destruction and attacks on individuals. This reflects differences in reporting patterns. However, research on radical left movements and publications on violent extremism in Denmark provide reports of activists using violence outside of escalated demonstrations (e.g. Larsen 2012, 2019; Karpantschhof & Mikkelsen 2002, 2008, 2009, 2014).

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