

# Who Are 'We' in a Nuclear Disaster? The Politics of Eco-performance in Late 1970's Sweden

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## **ABSTRACT**

This article explores a major but largely forgotten event at the intersection of the environmental movement and the movement of independent theatre groups in Sweden. *Eko-positivet*, a ritualistic mass-performance about nuclear power, was performed in Stockholm in May 1977 by 300-400 participants in front of around 4 000 spectators. In contrast to the discourse on class that dominated the political theatre of the time, the mass-spectacle enacted other kinds of collective, political identities, e.g. populist and biological ones. The established independent theatre groups did not participate in the event. In the article, it is argued that this reluctance can be explained by conflicting views on the political 'we'.

## **KEYWORDS**

eco-performance, independent theatre, Sweden, 1970s, politics, collective identities

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## Introduction

The mid- to late 1970s was a time when radical or alternative discourses collided – an 'old' and established one, often on Marxist(-Leninist) grounds, focusing on class and economy, and a 'new' one, around environmental issues. This period has been acknowledged as the time when the spirit of 1968 was challenged, reformed, and possibly replaced by something else.<sup>1</sup> This is when the so-called 'new social movements', such as the 'alternative movement', gained in momentum in Sweden and elsewhere.<sup>2</sup> Parallel to the change in the radical political sphere was a similar and related development in the field of independent theatre. In 1977, the first wave of independent groups, with roots going back to the 1960s, was peaking, and a second wave of groups was on the rise. On a general level, one could speak of a shift of focus from a relatively clear focus on ideology and words to a growing interest in physical acting styles and ritual modes of communication.

In this article, I articulate this scene change through analysing an eco-performance from 1977 and contrasting it with a joint performance by some of the first wave groups. Both events took place in May 1977, they were both large-scale, non-institutional and, albeit in different ways, political.

On 1 May, the mammoth-sized production *Vi äro tusenden...* (We are thousands...) had its premiere. Taking place in a circus tent, this music-theatre performance dealt with the history of the Swedish working-class movement and, in particular, its relationship to the Social Democratic Party. A few weeks later, on 14 and 31 May, two versions of a mass-spectacle occurred in central Gothenburg and Stockholm respectively. Blending political demonstration with street and mass theatre, the spectacles involved hundreds of participants, mainly amateurs, who presented a simple tale about an ecological disaster and a postapocalyptic utopia in front of thousands of spectators. The first of

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1 Östberg 2002.

2 Wiklund 2006 and 2012.

the two events, *Vi äro tusenden...*, was something of a grand finale of the first wave of independent theatre groups in Sweden. The mass-spectacle, on the other hand, may in hindsight be connected to the rise of a second wave of groups. Both events were covered extensively by the media. But while the first one, *Vi äro tusenden...*, has been inscribed in Swedish theatre history – and is mentioned in both national and international theatre histories – the mass-spectacle has been largely forgotten and never researched.<sup>3</sup>

The first section of the article focuses on the first wave of groups and the post 1968 left-wing. I use ideas from social movements studies to characterize these movements. In this section, I also introduce the so-called 'alternative movement', which gained in strength during the mid to late 1970s.<sup>4</sup> There then follows two sections on the reception and performance of *Eko-positivet*. In the analysis of the performance, I will take inspiration from Chantal Mouffe and focus particularly on the construction of collective identities. What kind of politics was enacted and manifested in the mass-spectacle? What kind of 'we' and 'they' were performed? To deepen the analysis and relate it to the public space where the performance took place, I will also make use of insights from research on performances in public spaces. The source material consists of archival documents such as scripts, press releases, and photos, but also articles and reviews from newspapers and magazines. I have furthermore conducted interviews with people involved in organizing and performing the mass-spectacle, which was necessary to reconstruct the event for analytical reasons.

### **Independent theatre and social movements**

The independent theatre movement in Sweden can be said to begin in 1965 with the formation of the groups Narren (The Jester) and Proteus.<sup>5</sup> In the years that followed, there was an eruption of independent theatre groups. Student theatres at the universities evolved into independent groups, actors from institutions quit their job and formed independent groups instead, and amateurs turned semi-professional and independent. In 1968, a small organization called ASTA was founded – the acronym stood for Aktionsgruppen för socialistiska teaterarbetare (Action Group for Socialist Theatre Workers). A year later the association transformed into Teatercentrum (Theatre Centre) and soon became influential in the field of theatre. By the early 1970s, Teatercentrum consisted of about 50 independent theatre groups.<sup>6</sup> The first wave of independent theatre

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3 For an extensive analysis of *Vi äro tusenden...*, see Fornäs 1985. The production/project is also highlighted in Forser 2007, Sauter 1996 and 2004, Wirmark 1992 and "Sweden" 2000 [1988].

4 Freeman has a similar approach: "Rehistoricizing eighties British alternative theater companies in relation to social movement theory (not just histories of aesthetics) positions their organizational structures and artistic projects as theatrical manifestations of important ongoing social processes." (Freeman 2012, 128)

5 Granath 1997.

6 Johansson 1975. Teatercentrum gathered a large majority of the existing groups and very few of the more important groups remained outside (e.g. Pistolteatern). The organization functioned as a kind of employment agency, a consultant body that was asked for comments on cultural policy and as a disseminator of state support. Teatercentrum still exists, but the clear ideological stance

groups in Sweden, with Teatercentrum as its gathering force, was largely a post 1968 phenomena with a clear left-wing bent. Many of the theatre groups were closely linked to communist and socialist parties and organizations, either through individual memberships or on a more organizational level.<sup>7</sup>

Within the field of social movements studies, there has been a long discussion of 'old' and 'new' social movements. With the term 'new social movements' (NSM), researchers generally refer to types of social movements that grew strong from the late 1960's and onwards. These range from the LGBT movement and disability rights movement to the anti-nuclear and environmental movement. When the 'newness' of the NSMs is described in sociological literature, a number of traits re-occur: NSM lack a clear class-base when it comes to their members; NSM are not easily categorized according to traditional scales, such as right-left, capitalism-socialism; they tend to focus on cultural, symbolical, and social issues rather than economical ones; they are not centralized and bureaucratized but decentralized, meaning that they divert from the hierarchical structure of the labour movement or the centralized structure of Leninist organizations.<sup>8</sup>

The first wave of independent groups and the radical left-wing can be said to have a mix of 'old' and 'new' traits, but with emphasis on the 'old'.<sup>9</sup> Compared to the labour movement, most of the social movements of the 1960s consisted of people with a diverse socioeconomic background: middle class, working class, students, intellectuals, etc. In this respect, the radical left-wing and the first wave groups could be characterized as 'new social movements'. But one indication of how the 'old' lingered in the movements of the 1960's is the ideal, especially within the Leninist left, to 'proletarianize', i.e. to take a 'proletarian' job for ideological reasons.<sup>10</sup> This indicates that the working class was still considered to be the sole subject of the revolution. According to historian Kjell Östberg, the left-wing rooted in the late 1960s was clearly attached to the 'old': "The labour movement and Marxism and its tools of struggle were [...] a natural point of reference."<sup>11</sup> With regards to organizational structure, the Leninist and Maoist left was clearly traditional.<sup>12</sup>

The most famous theatrical output from the first wave of groups was *Vi äro tusenden...*, which toured Sweden in 1977 and was performed in front of almost 100 000 spectators in total. *Vi äro tusenden...* was a joint project by several of the most influential groups connected to Teatercentrum, but also with participation of individual artists from institutional theatres. The performance consisted of three acts, with an effective performance time of close to 4 hours.

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has long since been removed.

7 See Bergman 2010 for links between Fria Proteatern and the Maoist Sveriges Kommunistiska Parti (Sweden's Communist Party).

8 Laraña et al 1994, 7 f. See Östberg 2002 for a discussion of the Swedish post 68-movement in light of NSM-theories.

9 For a nuanced and updated discussion of 'old' and 'new' traits, see Della Porta and Diani 2006, 62.

10 Östberg 2014.

11 Östberg 2002, 20 f. My translation.

12 Ibid. 2002, 172.

It was performed 96 times in 30 cities in a circus tent housing 1500 spectators. *Vi äro tusenden...* was the name of the actual performance, but the whole project, including preparations, organization, touring, etc., is often referred to as Tältprojektet (The Tent Project). The project itself, and the performance, had been discussed between the groups for many years, according to some as early as the late 1960s. *Vi äro tusenden...* involved over 80 people plus 2000 local collaborators, so called 'supporting committees'. According to Fornäs, the members of the core group were all ideologically left-wing, ranging from anarchists, Stalinists, and Trotskyists to undogmatic socialists.<sup>13</sup> The 'music-theatre-circus-performance' retold 100 years of the history of the Swedish labour movement through glimpses of everyday life together with important historical scenes. Ideologically, it focused on how the working class in Sweden had been 'betrayed' by the Social Democratic party. In the program, the project was explicitly presented as rooted in the late 1960s: "Since the end of the 1960s, a large cultural movement has grown in Sweden, consisting mainly of music and theatre groups whose mission has been to find an audience that has never before been reached by [...] theatre and music that address and examine the reality we live in today from a socialist perspective."<sup>14</sup> The main goal of the project was to reach out to the working class and to perform 'their' history. The political 'we' was obvious, and even inscribed in the title ('Vi').

Although lively debated and also heavily criticized, the project was seen as a manifestation of the strength of the independent groups. At the time, the project was by many greeted as the beginning of something, but in retrospect *Vi äro tusenden...* has been inscribed in contemporary Swedish theatre history as a finale, crescendo, and an endpoint of the spirit of 1968 in Swedish theatre.<sup>15</sup> But it was not only in the field of independent theatre that changes occurred during these years. Historians and sociologists locate the downfall of the radical 1960s, especially in Europe, to the last years of the 1970s.<sup>16</sup> For the radical left, the years from 1976 onwards could be characterized as years of confusion, fragmentation, and weakening. In 1976, the Social Democratic party lost the election for the first time since 1928. In 1977, a war broke out between two socialist states, Vietnam (supported by the Soviet Union) and Cambodia (supported by China).<sup>17</sup> In 1978, when the tenth anniversary of 1968 was celebrated, the "vitality and enthusiasm" of 68 had been replaced by an "obvious weariness".<sup>18</sup> While the radical left was falling apart, the environmental movement gained in momentum. The so-called 'alternative movement' (Alternativrörelsen) in Sweden started forming in the mid-70s, but its roots go further back. It consisted of a loose cluster of people and organizations focused on environmentalism, non-violence, resistance to nuclear power, weapons, and women's rights issues, but it also included neo-religious streams such as new

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13 Fornäs 1985.

14 As quoted in Fornäs, 1985. My translation.

15 Forser 2007, 467; Sauter 1996, 177; Sauter 2004, 209.

16 For an overview of research, see Östberg 2002, 13.

17 See Ers 2014 for an overview of the post-utopianism of 1970s Sweden.

18 Wiklund 2012, 73. My translation.

age.<sup>19</sup> It carried ideas reminiscent of the movements of the 1960s, but at the same time it was less explicitly political; “the ‘alternative’”, as one researcher writes, “was usually considered as a position beyond right and left, beyond capitalism and socialism”.<sup>20</sup> One of the gathering ideas of the alternative movement was a critique against the accumulation of power and the growth of bureaucracy in Swedish society. Instead, the movement often had participatory democracy as an ideal and focused more on the individual, which meant that people were “imagined as active and willing and able to take on responsibility themselves”.<sup>21</sup> The alternative movement turned against rationality and instead praised values such as imagination, community, enchantment, and sensuality; they turned against a technocratic society where people were treated as passive objects, as nothing but consumers.<sup>22</sup>

While the first wave of independent theatre groups had rather explicit connections to the political left-wing, the links between the second wave groups and the alternative movement were not always as clear. However, *Eko-positivet* was one event where the social movements and the theatrical ones gathered forces. Two of the most important theatre groups of the second wave, Jordcirkus (Earthcirkus [sic]) and Eldteatern (The fire theatre), both connected to what Eugenio Barba termed ‘the third theatre’, participated in *Eko-positivet*, as a group or as individuals.<sup>23</sup>

The year 1977 has been seen as a particularly notable year in the historiography of contemporary Swedish theatre. Referring to *Vi äro tusenden...* and to the amateur/community play *Spelet om Norbergsstrejken* (The play about the strike in Norberg) historiographers have seen 1977 as a year for both endings and beginnings – the grand finale of the first wave of independent theatre and the beginning of a new type of worker’s theatre, popular throughout the 1980s.<sup>24</sup> However, there were several other important performances and events during 1977. Fria Proteatern, perhaps the most important independent group of the first wave, performed their biggest success so far, *Hårda Bandage* (Tight bandages), a play about the health care system; Skeppsholmsfestivalen was organized, an alternative festival gathering folk and amateur performers and including Augusto Boal’s first visit to Sweden; Teatercentrum started publishing its journal, *Nya Teatertidningen*, thereby widening the reach and impact of the organization. In the summer and autumn of 1977, a group of people from *Eko-positivet* would form Jordcirkus, who, in October, participated in a house squatting action in Stockholm, later resulting in the mass-performance *Mullvads-operan* (The mole opera).

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19 In Swedish, the plural ‘Alternativrörelserna’ (The alternative movements) is often used to mark the diversity of the movement(s).

20 Wiklund 2006, 277. My translation.

21 Ibid., 281. My translation.

22 Ibid., 286 f.

23 Barba’s article on the third theatre was originally published in 1976 (reprinted in Barba 1999). Apart from Barba and Grotowski, the most important source of inspiration for the second wave of groups was probably Ingmar Lindh and his Institutet för scenkonst.

24 See for example Sauter 2004, 209.



### ***Eko-positivet* – context and reception**

When *Eko-positivet* took place in May 1977, nuclear power had been one of the most important political issues for some years. 1972 is by many considered the year when nuclear power became a political and not solely technical issue in Sweden. This was also the year when the first commercial nuclear power plant in Sweden was inaugurated. In the following years, the number of nuclear power plants in Sweden grew – and so did the debate.<sup>25</sup>

Two versions of the so-called “mass-spectacle against nuclear power” were performed in 1977, first in Gothenburg on May 14 and then in Stockholm on May 31.<sup>26</sup> The mass-spectacle was a joint effort by environmental groups, theatre practitioners, and others. The event engaged between 300 and 400 performers who performed in front of an audience of 8 000 in Gothenburg and 4 000 in Stockholm, which probably makes it one of the largest theatrical events in Swedish history. The story and the performance style were simple, well suited for the public space. The script was minimal, and the participants made more use of physical and emotional acting styles than of words and arguments. The events were produced locally but involved a core-group of about 25 people.<sup>27</sup> Thus, there were obvious similarities between the two versions, but also some differences – in this article I use the Stockholm version as my prime example, but many of the scenes seem to have been performed in more or less the same way in Gothenburg. The most important person for organizing the project was Chris Torch, a former member of the Living Theatre, who had recently come to Sweden.<sup>28</sup>

The radical left mostly kept their hands off of *Eko-positivet* and none of the independent theatre groups from the first wave participated.<sup>29</sup> While the event was covered by the major newspapers, the left-wing press almost completely ignored it.<sup>30</sup> Neither *Gnistan*, *Norrskensflamman*, *Proletären*, *Ungkommunisten*

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25 Anshelm 2000, 116 ff.; 187 ff. In 1980, a referendum was held, resulting in a win for ‘Linje 2’, a middle-ground compromise regarding the future for nuclear power in Sweden.

26 The title of the Gothenburg version was *Mass-spektakel mot kärnkraft* (*Mass-spectacle against nuclear power*), while in Stockholm the title was *Eko-positivet* with the subtitle *mass-spektakel mot kärnkraft för ett ekologiskt samhälle* (*mass-spectacle against nuclear power for an ecological society*). “Positiv” is the Swedish word for barrel organ, i.e. an instrument often used with a crank handle and most often associated with the circus, fairgrounds, street performances, and such like events.

27 The core group, who wrote and prepared the spectacle, was supposed to consist of people “with much past experience in theatre work, collective political work, and/or music”, according to a synopsis (“EKO-POSITIVET – a workshop project in large-scale collective fantasy”, Teater 9’s archive, E1:4, English in original).

28 From his work with the Living Theatre, Torch brought an ideological mix of anarchism, pacifism, and non-violence as well as experiences from street and mass theatre in environmental issues. Before coming to Stockholm, Torch also spent some time with the activist theatre group Solvognen in Denmark. In 1976, he held his first courses in street-theatre at Teaterhuset in Nacka, outside of Stockholm. In retrospect, Teaterhuset in Nacka might be considered as one of the hubs for the new tendencies in Swedish independent theatre at the time, a sphere without many connections to the established independent theatre milieu around Teatercentrum.

29 Engström 1977.

30 Reports, articles, and reviews, of various scope, in the larger newspapers include: Josefsson 1977, Sandberg 1977, Åsheden 1977, Bäckström 1977, Olsson 1977, Ekelund 1977, Larsson

nor *Clarté* mentions *Eko-positivet*. The articles in these journals that concerned theatre dealt instead with *Vi äro tusenden....*, *Spelet om Norbergsstrejken*, and Fria Proateatern's *Hårda Bandage*, all performances with an apparent class-perspective. This bias points to the close connection between the radical left-wing press (Marxist, Marxist-Leninist, Maoist) and the independent groups of the first wave. There are two exceptions to this lack of interest. The first is the Trotskyist journal *Internationalen*, in which three of the organizers of the Gothenburg version wrote an article about the event.<sup>31</sup> The other left-wing journal that reported from the event was the short-lived and mostly unknown journal *Partisano*. Tellingly, *Partisano*, and its more well-known successor *ETC*, was part of a reformation of the radical left which focussed more on environmental issues and identity politics than the established Marxist-Leninist left.<sup>32</sup>

Why did the rest of the left-wing press not report about the mass-spectacle? First of all, the ideological orthodoxy common in the radical left was lacking in the mass-spectacle. The vagueness of the political orientation was noticed by one journalist from the established media: “[I]f you try to describe the political anchoring and affiliation, it gets problematic.”<sup>33</sup> But the reluctance to participate or even report the event probably also had to do with the overall spirit in the environmental movement compared to the post 1968 left-wing. With this in mind, it is quite ironic that one reporter argued that this kind of collective expression had not been seen since the 1960s: “[I]t is a revival of enthusiasm and commitment that does not fit in the established [...] political parties of left-wing fractions.”<sup>34</sup> The comment indicates that the energy and momentum that the left had had a few years earlier were now gone. Although the organizers behind *Eko-positivet* did not explicitly criticize the established left-wing, they indirectly took a stand against them. In a press release, the organizers described the performative form of the event as a critique of the existing forms of politics: “Away with all the boring demonstration where the participants walk in school-class-like lines. The opposite of nuclear power, of our technocratic society, is fantasy and playfulness. Therefore, we shall [...] fill the city with street theatre, clowns, musicians, acrobats, choirs, dance groups...”<sup>35</sup> Turning the political manifestation into something sensorial and corporeal – “protesting against nuclear power with your body”<sup>36</sup> – was a way to react against the rationality, functionalism and bureaucracy of the established society. The overall atmosphere of the mass-spectacle fits well with the key themes of the alternative movement: fantasy, emotion, and enchantment.<sup>37</sup> In the theatre journals – *entré*, *Nya Teatertidningen*, *Ord & Bild* – I have not

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1977, Mannheimer 1977, Melander 1977.

31 *Internationalen* was published by the Trotskyist organization Kommunistiska Arbetarförbundet (Communist Workers Association), today Socialistiska Partiet (Socialist Party).

32 The people behind *Partisano/ETC* belonged to the Trotskyist fraction Kommunistiska Arbetarförbundet, but the journal was (and is) an independent left-wing journal (Ehrenberg 2017).

33 Josefsson.

34 Ibid.

35 “Vi hånskrattar...”, information sheet, no date, no author, Jordcirkus’ archive, F1:2.

36 Åsheden 1977.

37 Wiklund 2006, 300 f.



found any mention of *Eko-positivet* from 1977.<sup>38</sup> As comparison, both *entré* and *Nya Teatertidningen* wrote several articles and quite extensively about *Vi äro tusenden...* This lack of interest can be explained by the fact that *Eko-positivet* was on the border between politics and art, blending the mode of demonstration with that of theatre. It should also be noted that most of the newspaper writings on *Eko-positivet* were news articles rather than theatre reviews. Even though *Eko-positivet* was not the first eco-performance in Sweden, it was hailed as something new.<sup>39</sup> In several of the articles, 'street theatre' was introduced as a new form of theatre, uncommon, or even non-existent in Sweden.<sup>40</sup>

### ***Eko-positivet* – the event**

My argument in the following is that *Eko-positivet* enacted collective identities that were not hegemonic in the field of independent theatre at the time. With regards to the politics of the performance, I follow Chantal Mouffe who sees politics as a question of creating a 'we' that is opposed to a 'they'.<sup>41</sup> According to Mouffe, 'the political' is "the dimension of antagonism I take to be constitutive of human societies".<sup>42</sup> Antagonism, i.e. the construction of collective identities through the division in 'we' and 'they', is essential. As simple as this may sound, it has important implications for an analysis of the political aspects of theatre. *Eko-positivet* was indeed political in the simplest sense, i.e. through treating a political subject (nuclear power). However, in my analysis, I do not focus on politics as a choice of subject, but rather on the way that collective identities are formed – in the audience, among the performers/characters or between these groups. It is on this level that *Eko-positivet* most clearly diverted from the Marxist-Leninist left and the theatre groups connected to this movement. This is not to say that the first wave groups completely lacked an interest in environmental politics such as the nuclear issue. But they tended to subordinate other issues to the Marxist doctrine of class struggle, and to see the working class as the collective identity par excellence.

Against the backdrop of the established left-wing theatre in Sweden at the time, e.g. *Vi äro tusenden...*, which largely focused on issues of class and economy, I want to elucidate the different kinds of collective identities that were enacted in *Eko-positivet*. How was the divide between 'we' and 'they'

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38 The theatre groups of the second wave that emanated from people active in the mass-spectacles – Eldteatern and Jordcirkus – did not get attention from the theatre press until the 1980's. See for example an article on Jordcirkus in *entré* 1980, in which *Eko-positivet* is mentioned as part of their history as a group (von Rettig 1980).

39 Theatrical activism with an environmental edge had been done a few times earlier in Stockholm, for example by the short-lived 'provies' in 1966-67 inspired by the Dutch 'provos' and 'kabouters'. Within the environmental movement of the mid to late 1970's, especially the organization called Alternativ stad, "symbolic-expressive actions" were performed on a number of occasions (Stahre 2002, 145 f.).

40 See for example Åsheden 1977. Street theatre in a broad sense was not a new theatre form in Sweden. Some of the independent groups of the late 1960s had, occasionally, worked in the streets, Fickteatern (The pocket theatre) being one of the most prominent examples. But the mix of mass-theatre and political demonstration, i.e. the form of *Eko-positivet*, was something new.

41 Mouffe 2005, 11.

42 Mouffe 2005, 9.

constructed in the performance? What was the place of antagonism and conflict in *Eko-positivet*? In the analysis, I will also pay attention to space and what it meant that the performance took place in the streets and on the central square of Stockholm. Some insights from studies of performance in public spaces will help to deepen the analysis of the political aspects of the event.

*Part one.* The mass-spectacle began in a kind of ideal ur-condition. The performers were divided into four groups called the “life processions” or “tribes” in the script. Each group represented an element and a season and had specific characteristics: the Water/Spring-group were dressed in blue and played jaw harps, flutes and string instruments; the Fire/Summer-group wore red, yellow, and orange and lit candles and sparklers; the Earth/Autumn-group had green clothes, played violins, and handed out bread to the spectators; and, lastly, the Wind/Winter-group wore light blue and white, played horn instruments and handed out fruit. The groups started at the same time from four different locations close to the city centre and walked in processions toward the central square, “like veins to the heart”, according to the script. When they arrived at the square (Sergels torg) they entered it from four different directions, “crazy, beautiful, life-filled”.<sup>43</sup>

Being performed in a public space, the mass-spectacle had a kind of performative quality that indoor theatre often lacks. It was not only about showing something, but also doing something: occupying the streets and squares with human bodies turned these spaces into something else. As John Bell writes about Bread and Puppet Theatre, one of the companies that can be seen as an inspiration for the mass-spectacle: “A parade celebrates the public nature of the entire street, repossessing it (momentarily) from the state and from productive use, redefining it as a performance space, and thus celebrating all those participating – paraders and pedestrians, performers and audience. The parade’s festive, non-productive use of the street is always subtly or blatantly carnivalesque.”<sup>44</sup> There is a political aspect of the street theatre form which has to do with bodies and places more than with political messages delivered verbally. Turning the pedestrian street and the square into a carnival highlighted the quotidian and commented upon it. It replaced consumerism with a different and, according to the performers, preferred form of life. Furthermore, it is also in the relation between the ‘real’ and the ‘fictitious’ that the political tension, the antagonism, lies. On the level of fiction, there was no conflict between collectives: the four seasons and the four elements of the “life processions” signalled diversity, but taken together they formed a whole (e.g. humanity, life, cosmos), lacking antagonism.<sup>45</sup> The ‘we’ was diverse and multi-coloured, yet unified, which made the whole scene quite a-political – at this point, there was no ‘they’ within the narrative. In so far as one could find a ‘they’ and thereby an antagonistic conflict in this first section, it has to do with space and the audience.

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43 Script, no date, no author, Jordcirkus’ archive, F1:2.

44 Bell 1998, 278.

45 Worth noting in relation to the performance of ‘humanity’ is the rather Eurocentric worldview. The seasons seem to have been defined according to the temperate climate of (Northern) Europe and the idea of the four elements points back to Aristotle.

The antagonistic tension in the scene seems to run between the street as an everyday space and the parade as a carnival, between, on the one hand, the supposedly ignorant public and the barren city space as a symptom of the technocratic and consumerist discourse, and the environmentally enlightened activists and 'true' life on the other.

*Part two.* In the next part of the spectacle, the enemy, the 'they', was introduced in the fictional sphere as well. When the processions reached the square, someone was already there. On a small stage in the middle of the square, a heteronormative 'nuclear family' had been placed. The father, mother, son, and daughter of the family stood on the stage "like statues", "smiling/waving/plastic", according to the script. Through a loudspeaker, consumerist messages were delivered: "The one who has something is something. Buy your house today!" Consequently, entering the square was an illustration of the urbanization process; leaving the tribal and rural life behind and instead being packed together in a limited, urban space. Modern society was here characterized as an artificial and technological form of living. The nuclear family was stiff and plastic, and the consumerist messages were delivered through the technological apparatus of the loudspeaker, making the voice slightly uncanny and unnatural. The four life processions were then ambushed by 'death squads' as the enemies were called in the script. They passivized and enslaved the people, while the voice in the loudspeakers continued: "Jobs for everyone. Safety. A strong society." The people were forced to work to a monotonous drum rhythm until they had reshaped the stage into a nuclear power plant. A few performers played the role of politicians and had been watching the actions from a balcony above the square. They now came down and ceremonially opened the nuclear power plant by cutting a ribbon. The section ended with people being led into the shape of a radioactivity symbol, covering a large part of the square.

This part of the performance enacted the move from a life of joyful celebration and diversity to consumerism, work, and subordination. And with the entrance of an enemy – an elite, consisting of technocrats, politicians and multinational capitalists – the story formed into a populist tale of a conflict between the elite and the people.<sup>46</sup> Forcing the 'we' into the form of a radioactive symbol – that seems to signal inhuman perfection – abolished the original diversity and creativity altogether. The 'we' was clearly defeated. In an article on the semiotics of demonstrations, Louis Marin writes that the square where parades end and the participants gather best could be understood as a place for a "symbolic victory", e.g. the square where Labour Day parades end.<sup>47</sup> But in *Ekopositivet*, the ordinary dramaturgy of the parade was turned around and the square was the place for defeat, at least initially. The symbolic weight of this downfall increases when considering the actual place of the performance.

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46 According to Ernesto Laclau, different political contents, i.e. left as well as right, can be given a "populist articulation". What is common for all kinds of populism is that they are critical of the system and turn against a society that conceals antagonisms and instead seeks technocracy and management (Laclau 2010, 105 f.).

47 Marin 2001, 43.

Sergels torg is often seen as the centre of Stockholm and, presumably, many Swedes would call it the centre of Sweden.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, at the time when the mass-spectacle took place, the Swedish parliament was housed in a building along one of the sides of the square. When the performers playing politicians watched the construction of the nuclear power plant from above the square, they stood in front of the temporary parliament building, thus mirroring the actual sight perspective of the real politicians if they would have looked out from their windows. The symbolic and real function of the space was used in the performance – the ‘we’ gathered and was defeated in a highly symbolic place, while the fictitious as well as the real ‘they’ (the politicians) were looking on. The real was thus inscribed in the story and given a role in the fiction.<sup>49</sup>

*Part three.* The next section of the mass-spectacle seems to have been particularly important. It started with a warning signal and a voice in the loudspeakers declaring “Warning. Warning. Industrial disaster”, followed by a mass-death, performed by all participants. The scene was described in several newspapers, and it is described in more detail in the script than the other scenes: “A slowly built up collective death. From fear to a point where everyone suffers the most violent and painful death you can imagine. At the end, Sergels Torg is filled with distorted and stiff corpses. Nothing but a long monotonous warning signal is heard. Finally, the signal stops and absolute silence and stillness prevail among the actors on Sergels Torg.”<sup>50</sup>

It is perhaps in this scene that the genre, the mass performance in a public space, proved to be most efficient. The scene was both a ‘performance of possibility’ and a ‘die-in’, techniques that are rather common within environmental and other forms of activist theatre and performance.<sup>51</sup> By enacting a potential disaster resulting in collective death, the actors strove to awaken people and make them politically conscious and aware of the risks of nuclear technology. Once more, the ‘realness’ of the space comes forth as crucial for the function and impact of the fiction. It is here, in the square and streets of the city, that people would drop dead in case of a nuclear disaster. It is not in a fictitious space created in a theatre (or a circus tent). It is also made clear that the risks of nuclear power are evenly distributed, ignoring socioeconomic differences. The performance of the collective death could therefore be called a ‘performance of humanity’. The ‘we’ affected by environmental disaster is not a political one, but a biological one – there is no ‘they’ that stays unaffected. The guilt might belong to someone, but the punishment is for everyone.

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48 Sergels torg, with its characteristic floor pattern in black and white triangles, is often used for manifestations of various kinds, ranging from political demonstrations and cultural events to the celebration of homecoming sportsmen and sportswomen.

49 According to one report, there were politicians looking at the performance from the windows of the parliament’s building (N.N. 1977, “Aktiviteten kom loss”).

50 Script, no date, no author, Jordcirkus’ archive, F1:2.

51 For ‘performance of possibility’, see Standing 2012, 151. A ‘die-in’ has been defined as a “theatrical event where participants en masse pretend to be dead for a designated period of time, usually in carefully chosen locations to maximize effect or exposure.” (Hanna et al 2016). For examples of ‘die-in’ in a Swedish environmental context, see Stahre 2002, 148. For an example related to nuclear weapons, see Cook and Kirk 1998, 160.

*Part four.* The status quo was broken by a drum, beating like a heart. People woke up slowly and after some struggle they managed to stand up. They declared their victory, tore down the nuclear plant, replaced it with a windmill and the whole event ended with song, collective dancing, and a “ritual of communal understanding”.

Once more, humanity as a biological species is underscored; the death was collective, and so was the resurrection. It should also be noted that it is the human heart, the pulsating drum rhythm, that awakens people and inspires them to revolt, rather than political discussions and education. The utopianism of the end scene, where people are united through rituals, removes politics altogether in Mouffe’s sense. A society without antagonism and conflict is an a-political society.<sup>52</sup>

### **The politics of eco-performance**

From a traditional Marxist point of view, *Eko-positivet* could be easily criticized for its unclear class perspective. In the story, the people are enslaved by industrialism and then the next part of the story is the nuclear disaster. Hundreds of years of struggle between workers and capitalists are skipped altogether (as is socialism’s and communism’s ‘victories’). A slightly more nuanced analysis of the performance can show that the ‘we’ in the performance fluctuates – at times consisting of the people, in a populist sense, standing against an elite, while at times being more biological in its definition, including all of humanity. The performance ‘democratized’ the risk and the punishment of nuclear power, but not the guilt. It was still the elite, ‘they’, that enslaved the people and forced them to build the nuclear power plant. From today’s perspective, when environmentalism has become a mainstream issue and at least to some extent been de-politicized, *Eko-positivet* might appear as an undoubtedly left-wing performance. But at the time, its relatively unclear class-perspective kept the radical left-wing away.

Despite its obvious focus on environmentalism, *Eko-positivet* was not a single-issue event. At least to some extent, it had the character of an umbrella under which various interests gathered and intermingled. In a leaflet for the event, one finds a list over the characteristics of an ‘ecological’ and an ‘un-ecological’ society. While some of the points are about environmental politics, most of them are actually about other issues. The ecological society is said to be connected to handcrafts, democracy, local culture, mixing of generations, low unemployment and community, while the un-ecological society stands for mass-production, hierarchical politics, world trade, mass culture, high unemployment, nuclear family, etc.<sup>53</sup> Apparently, the ideology put forth by *Eko-positivet* has as much to do with the economy and the politics of distribution as with social issues such as cross-generational community and norm criticism. The leaflet and the performance argues that there is a bond between the ‘nuclear family’ and the nuclear power plant, between questions of gender and environmental

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52 See for instance Mouffe and Laclau 2001 [1985], where the authors criticize Communism’s utopianism and longing for an a-political society.

53 “Eko-positivet”, information sheet, no date, no author, Jordcircus’ archive, F1:2.



issues. There is, in other words, a mixture of traditional left-wing issues around class, power, and distribution of wealth and issues of environmentalism and family structures.

Eight years after *Eko-positivet*, in 1985, Mouffe and Laclau were to publish their influential attempt to rethink Marxism in relation to the new social movements. While the 'old' left gives the working class and economic issues a privileged position, Mouffe and Laclau insist that the left needs to cooperate with the new social movements, in order to become a truly progressive and politically potent force. The left needs to work together with movements such as the feminist and environmental ones and to construct "chains of equivalence" between these. This, then, also means abandoning the essentialist and determinist tendencies within Marxism. As they write in their foreword to the second edition of the book: "The solution is not to abandon the 'cultural' struggle to go back to 'real' politics. One of the central tenets of *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* is the need to create a chain of equivalence among the various democratic struggles against different forms of subordination. We argued that struggles against sexism, racism, sexual discrimination, and in the defence of the environment needed to be articulated with those of the workers in a new left-wing hegemonic project."<sup>54</sup> In light of this, *Eko-positivet* seems to have housed both a 'cultural' struggle and 'real' politics. It re-evaluated and widened the political subject and abandoned the essentialism around class, but without abandoning issues of equality, power, and democracy.

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54 Mouffe and Laclau 2001, xviii.

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