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Revanchism via Pedestrianism:
Street-level Bureaucracy in the Production of Uneven Policing Landscapes

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Abstract: The emergence over the last decade of large numbers of vulnerable EU citizens begging on Swedish streets has led to ambivalent responses from the Swedish state, including from local police forces charged with policing public order. Based on research including interviews with vulnerable EU citizens and with police officials in two socio-economically divergent areas of Stockholm, this paper seeks to understand how policing practices are motivated and enacted towards this group and how these practices are experienced by those targeted. The results reveal a set of policing practices which, whilst framed within a depoliticised logic of what Nicholas Blomley calls “pedestrianism”, work to produce spatially uneven punitive landscapes for those begging. The paper argues that understanding the role of police as “street-level bureaucrats” (following Michael Lipsky), with the agency to escalate or soften revanchist landscapes, is fundamental to understanding the contingencies at the heart of punitive urbanisms.

Keywords: policing, revanchism, pedestrianism, begging, public space, Sweden

Introduction

Studies into the logics and effects of public order policing have a long history (see e.g. Bittner 1967) but recent years have seen increased attention both within and outside of critical academia to the ways in which policing practices can reproduce exclusionary landscapes for marginalised groups (Çankaya 2020). Of these groups, the homeless, who must rely on public space for shelter and livelihoods, often feel the effects of these practices most keenly (Mitchell 2003; Waldron 1991). Attempts within critical geography to understand shifting patterns of homeless management in recent years have been dominated by work which has called on, revised and challenged Neil Smith’s (1996) conceptualisation of the “revanchist city”. Some of the most interesting work in recent years has come from scholars taking an explicitly relational approach to these issues, avoiding the temptation to resort to depictions of an undifferentiated “dystopian urbanism” (Merrifield 2000), instead focusing on the ways in which specific punitive interventions towards the homeless are contingently and unevenly produced with regard to local socio-spatial relations, and often alongside other more ambiguous
or supportive interventions (e.g. DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Johnsen and Fitzpatrick 2010; Stuart 2014). This paper seeks to contribute to this body of work, in an attempt to understand an emergent situation in which elements of punitive urbanism have arisen in the setting of Stockholm, Sweden.

Sweden is not a country usually associated with the harshest facets of neoliberal urbanism. However, the nation’s long-standing political consensus grounded in universalism, equality and solidarity has been tested in recent years (Schierup and Scarpa 2017), as neoliberal reforms have produced increasing socio-economic and ethnic division within cities (Grundström and Molina 2016) at the same time that a (re)emergent ethnonationalist movement has made its way to the heart of national politics in the form of the rise of the Swedish Democrats party. Indeed, one particular challenge to the notion of Swedish moral exceptionalism in recent years has been the emergence in many Swedish cities of individuals who have come to be known in common discourse variously as “vulnerable EU citizens”, “EU-migrants”, “the Roma” or simply “the beggars”.¹ These individuals, most of whom are Roma from Romania and Bulgaria, have in recent years arrived in Swedish cities to seek livelihood opportunities. With the accession of Romania and Bulgaria to the EU in 2007 and an increasingly desperate economic situation disproportionately affecting Roma communities in these countries, a movement of vulnerable EU citizens into cities across Europe has become a common sight (Djuve et al. 2015). Although many held hopes of finding employment in Sweden, the vast majority of these individuals have ended up relying on public space in search of both livelihoods, predominantly through begging and collecting bottles and cans known as “pant” to exchange for small sums of money, and shelter, either through sleeping on the streets or through the creation of informal camps, often in forested areas in marginal spaces around the city.²

Responses by the Swedish state at all levels have been characterised by ambivalence. Political discourse surrounding the group has tended to be couched in sympathetic rhetoric, and some local initiatives to provide shelter and services for vulnerable EU citizens have arisen in spatially uneven ways around the country. In the capital city of Stockholm, more supportive interventions have included projects between local state and NGOs to provide drop-in centres offering food and basic sanitation services, as well as a small handful of temporary shelters. However, these services only have the capacity to cater to a small percentage of those vulnerable EU citizens in the city, and are limited in terms of the hours they can be accessed, and the number of nights any individual can access a bed in one week. Indeed, the Swedish state has received considerable critique from human rights scholars for its failure to provide for the basic rights of this group as they relate to issues such as access to water and sanitation infrastructure (Davis and Ryan 2016) and rights to social assistance and medical care (Civil Rights Defenders 2015). The limited supportive interventions have been matched with a number of more seemingly punitive interventions, especially in Stockholm, for instance through the continuous and unorthodox evictions of informal settlements (Ryan 2014), reports of disproportionate and intimidating police interventions in some areas (Amnesty International 2018), and most recently, a number of municipalities around Sweden enforcing local bans on begging.
At the time of writing, begging remains legal across all public spaces in all but two of Stockholm county’s 26 municipalities; however, local realities on the ground cannot simply be “read off” formal policy, not least since local police, with agency as street-level bureaucrats, can be fundamental in effectively “making policy” as it is actually experienced on the ground (Lipsky 2010). This paper then seeks an entry point into understanding the ambivalent responses to the presence of vulnerable EU citizens on Swedish streets, with an empirical focus on policing practices towards individuals seeking livelihoods through begging in two socio-economically diverse areas of Stockholm in which begging remains legal. In order to do so, it addresses the experiences and insights of both police and individuals involved in begging practices in the city. The empirical argument of the paper is structured dialectically. Firstly, the paper outlines some of the experiences of those vulnerable EU citizens begging in two diverse areas of the city, an approach which finds evidence of spatially uneven policing practices, with punitive interventions focused in the wealthier, gentrified area of the city, somewhat in line with expectations derived from traditional critical urban theory which stresses the role of the neoliberal state in maintaining the frontiers of gentrification (Smith 1996). Secondly, the paper turns to address the rationalities for intervention from the side of the police. This suggests a more contingent, “messier” reality, more in line with recent critiques of revanchist theory (e.g. Stuart 2014), with the agency of police officers as street-level bureaucrats allowing for individual politics to inform discretionary decision making, although still in ways somewhat ordered by the path-dependencies produced by existing socio-spatial orders. Nick Blomley’s (2010a) concept of pedestrianism is employed in this analysis as a tool to understand the depoliticised legal rationalities framing the removal of individuals begging in certain areas of the city. Finally, in the concluding discussion, the paper takes a step back from the empirical focus on these two areas of Stockholm, to suggest how they relate to broader trends in the Swedish context towards the criminalisation of begging, and as such, how the Swedish case can speak back to the purported shift in other parts of the world towards what has been termed the “post-revanchist” city (Murphy 2009). Firstly though, the conceptual framework hinted at above will be elaborated in more detail, before a brief discussion on the paper’s geographical context and methodology.

From the Revanchist to the Post-Revanchist City
Most discussions within geography in recent years that relate to the treatments of homeless people in public space have been informed by Neil Smith’s (1996) treatise on “the revanchist city”. In The New Urban Frontier, Smith built on earlier works such as Mike Davis’ (1990) City of Quartz, to argue that neoliberal urbanism was creating increasingly brutal landscapes for marginalised groups such as the homeless. For Smith, these anti-poor interventions were a response to the perceived degradation of US inner cities in the late 20th century, which many saw as a product of excessively liberal social policies. As such, revanchism was a vengeful attempt by the ruling and middle classes to claim back the streets, expanding the frontiers of gentrification, and in the process, making urban space productive as
sites for capital accumulation. Smith’s work has been influential, with numerous geographers expanding on his ideas and tracing comparable revanchist interventions in cities around the world (Aalbers 2011; Atkinson 2003; MacLeod 2002; Swanson 2007). Other works, including later writings by Smith himself, have considered the ways in which revanchism might have “jumped scale”, with phenomena as wide ranging as white race riots in Sydney and US-led wars in the Middle East being subjected to conceptualisation within the language of revanchism (Lawton 2018; Slater 2016; Smith 2009).

There also has been a proliferation of work in recent years which has critiqued, while seeking to nuance this body of work (e.g. DeVerteuil 2014; Laurensen and Collins 2007; Van Eijk 2010). The main body of critique has highlighted a tendency amongst critical scholars to take a blinkered approach to complex geographies of homeless management, through using emotive language to paint a uniform image of “dystopian” urbanism (Merrifield 2000). In doing so, it is argued that relatively little attention has been paid in the revanchist literature to how policy is enacted and experienced on the ground, to spatial variation in punitive landscapes across and within cities, and to the ways in which punitive interventions are tempered (and even made possible) by more supportive interventions from the state and other local actors (DeVerteuil et al. 2009; Stuart 2014). In response, calls have been made for more explicitly relational research (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009) which recognises the “messy middle ground” (May and Cloke 2014) within the complex and sometimes contradictory landscapes of homeless management, and which pays attention to the socio-spatial relations in and between urban spaces which produce particular responses on the ground. Indeed, some scholars, following the work of Stacey Murphy (2009), have begun to identify what they see as a shift towards a “post-revanchist city” in some parts of the global North (DeVerteuil 2019; May and Cloke 2014). This trend towards post-revanchism does not represent an end to punitive policies towards the homeless, but rather a more ambivalent landscape, in which “kinder and gentler” strategies take a more central role (Murphy 2009:307). This shift is argued to have taken place in contexts in which the successful sanitisation of urban centres has already secured these sites of capital accumulation from homeless and other “disorderly” groups, or simply where a realisation has occurred that punitive interventions alone are simply untenable without simultaneous support and rehabilitation (DeVerteuil 2014), not least since “homeless people cannot be made to just leave” (Mitchell 2017:109). This paper builds upon this body of work, taking a relational comparative inspired approach which seeks to understand uneven punitive practices towards vulnerable EU citizens “on-the-ground” in two areas of Stockholm, before a concluding discussion which positions the Swedish response more broadly with regard to the trend towards post-revanchist landscapes reported elsewhere.

Policing in the Study of Homeless Geographies
The enactment of interventions towards the homeless in public space requires front-line agents, and it is local police forces that often find themselves positioned
on these front lines. The role of police officers on the street has never only been to prevent criminal activity, rather it has always, to varying degrees, also consisted of interventions to promote public order (Garnett 2009). Egon Bittner’s (1967) seminal ethnographic study on US policing in 1960s skid row was influential in demonstrating how police could work to maintain public order in ways that referenced, but did not necessarily follow directly from, legal structures. But it is in recent decades, after Kelling and Wilson (1982) had brought global notoriety to the broken windows thesis, that the role of police forces in enforcing public order norms has been formalised, often established within the remit of “community policing” practices. The broken windows thesis boils down to the claim that “serious street crime flourishes in areas in which disorderly behaviour goes unchecked” (Kelling and Wilson 1982). As such, in order to be successful in preventing crime, the police should extend their reach more closely into local communities, working to monitor signs of disorder, be they the titular broken window itself, or the “unchecked panhandler” (Kelling and Wilson 1982). Modern community policing ideals have incorporated broken windows theory into a set of practices which include closer relations between police and local stakeholders, amplifying the influence of these actors to guide policing priorities in line with local community concerns (Stuart 2014).

Indeed, an important element, sometimes overlooked in the revanchist literature, is the agency of the police themselves in interpreting and implementing policies and directives handed down from local or national levels (Raco 2003). Police officers are “street-level bureaucrats” who are expected to employ discretionary judgement in their daily interactions with the public, in their use of time as a resource, and even, practically, in their application of laws (Lipsky 2010). In part, this agency allows police officers a flexibility to maintain public order in ways that are pragmatic and sensitive to local concerns, but it also carries a risk of reproducing socio-economic and racial segregation, as police are charged with maintaining normative spatial orders, with which race and class are inevitably entangled (Capers 2009; Herbert 1996). The ways in which police discretion are guided by spatial imaginaries in which certain groups or actions are deemed to be inherently “out of place” has been well studied and framed using concepts such as “geopolicing” (Çankaya 2020). Proudfoot and McCann (2008) have stressed that while a focus on the discretion of street-level bureaucrats is vital to understanding geographically uneven landscapes of legal enforcement, this focus must also be balanced with an eye on the institutional, political and social contexts which limit the extent to which discretion can be exercised. In this sense, the logic and practices of these actors do not function independently of dominant relations of power, but neither should they be assumed to be one with the broader objectives of the state (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009). Indeed, police and other street-level bureaucrats can at one extreme engage in explicitly racist practices, but at the other extreme in practices of “ethical insurgency” in which they can work to disrupt what they see as unethical or exclusionary policies (Çankaya 2020; May et al. 2019). In this sense, police as street-level bureaucrats can be positioned centrally in defining the extent to which geographies of homelessness trend towards the punitive or the supportive, as their
daily discretionary practices in some sense *make* policy as it is experienced on the ground (Lipsky 2010).

**Pedestrianism: Depoliticising the Sidewalk**

An important development in the understanding of state interventions towards the homeless in public space in recent years, and one which takes a notable step away from the critical urban perspectives described above, has come from the legal geographer Nicholas Blomley (2010a). He argues that much of the critical urban literature which seeks to understand state interventions towards homeless people on the street, whilst valuable, fails to take seriously the powerful legal rationality which tends to underscore many of these interventions; a rationality he terms pedestrianism. For Blomley, pedestrianism is an incredibly wide reaching but little recognised rationality for the governance of urban space, which sees sidewalks as first and foremost sites for the free flow of pedestrian traffic, and seeks to regulate the distribution of persons (and things) in the interest of maximising this flow. This seemingly mundane logic differs fundamentally from the logics usually advanced by critical scholars and homeless advocates in that it conceives of the sidewalk not as a social space, in which the democratic rights of the homeless to use space are under threat from powers which seek to reclaim this space for political and economic ends, but instead as abstract space, in which people and objects are placed on the same ontological plane; as potential moving or static objects, to be arranged in a manner that promotes the primary function of the sidewalk as a site of pedestrian flow. Blomley (2010b:331) warns that a tendency amongst scholars and activists to disregard pedestrianism as a mere “smokescreen” for “more sinister agendas” such as revanchist desires to sanitise urban space of undesirable groups, rather than taking it seriously as an influential rationality in its own right, can lead to inevitable failure when launching political and legal challenges against interventions grounded in this logic. This is because pedestrianism does not function in the realm of social and political rights, but as a “particularly depoliticised spatialization” (Blomley 2010a:13) with no regard for whether an individual is rich or poor. For Blomley (2010a:11), the relationship between pedestrianism and political phenomena like revanchism is not straightforward:

First, while pedestrianism is a means by which the sidewalk may, on occasion, be “purified”, it does so on its own terms, the effect of which is to effectively depoliticise the sidewalk in striking and remarkably pervasive ways. Second, however, this is not to say that we can neatly reduce pedestrianism to an instrument of class rule or other exclusionary logics. While it is obviously not immune from broader relations of power, it also unfolds according to its own distinct logic, the effects of which cannot be explained by a singular social purpose.

This paper heeds Blomley’s call to take seriously the logic of pedestrianism, not disregarding it as a mere “smoke-screen” for underlying revanchist motivations, but rather considers how its mobilisation in the case at hand, filtered through the discretion of the police as street-level bureaucrats, unfolds in relation to “broader relations of power”, in order to produce specific geographies on the ground.
Swedish Neoliberalism and the Production of a Divided City

Sweden can present particulars challenges for scholars seeking to conceptualise seemingly punitive interventions in the dominant language of critical geography coined elsewhere in the global North, partly due to the nation’s ambivalent relationship with the forms of neoliberal urbanism usually associated with a growth in revanchist tendencies. Perhaps indicative of this, researchers working in the Swedish context have coined deliberately contradictory concepts such as “benevolent violence” (Barker 2017) and “soft policies of exclusion” (Thörn 2011) to understand Swedish interventions towards homeless groups in which elements of revanchist urbanism often coexist with benevolent practices and sympathetic discourses. This section therefore provides a (necessarily brief) discussion of the particular characteristics of Swedish neoliberalisation processes and their effects in recent years, before turning attention in on the two areas of Stockholm which formed the focus of the current case study.

Whilst there may be a disconnect between the Sweden of the real world and the “slightly imaginary Sweden” (Heilbroner 1992:46, cited in Christophers 2013:886) now built firmly into the utopian imaginaries of many on the international left, it remains true that the Swedish model did for many years provide some of the best evidence of a successful welfare state politics in action, with an overwhelming socio-political consensus built over a number of decades based on ideas such as wage solidarity and universalism within welfare, and supported by well-functioning institutions (Rutherford 2008; Schierup and Scarpa 2017; Stahre 2004). However, since the end of the 1980s Sweden has undergone what Schierup and Scarpa (2017:42) have described as “a ground-shattering reimagining of the nation” along broadly neoliberal lines. This process has incorporated sweeping restructurings of welfare systems, housing politics (Baeten 2012; Grundström and Molina 2016; Gustafsson 2019), the privatisation of a number of previously state-run institutions (Stahre 2004) and a novel focus on producing “commodifiable neighbourhoods” within increasingly entrepreneurial cities (Madureira and Baeten 2016:373). A number of scholars working in the Swedish context have however argued that the particular expressions of “actually existing neoliberalism” in Sweden (Brenner and Theodore 2002), produced in the context of a pre-existing discursive and institutional setting provided by years of social democratic consensus, has produced a somewhat fragmented expression of neoliberal ideology (Cele 2015; Rutherford 2008; Stahre 2004). In this sense, processes of neoliberal restructuring stand in tension with a set of distinctly anti-neoliberal values and institutions, producing a fragmented socio-political landscape which Christophers (2013) has described (with regard to Swedish housing politics) as a “monstrous hybrid”. The effects of these processes are debated, but the first decades of the 21st century have seen a fast-growing trend towards inequality with regards to income, housing and employment, and a breakdown in political consensus, not least when it comes to the historically liberal approach to immigration and the social citizenship rights of migrants (Schierup and Scarpa 2017). One result then appears to have been a “deepening racialization of inequality” (Schierup and Scarpa 2017:64), and crisis of solidarity manifested most clearly in
the startling rise in popularity of the ethno-nationalist party The Swedish Democrats, who at the time of writing, can lay claim to being the second biggest party in Sweden.

These political shifts of recent years have been spatialised in the major cities, and perhaps most visibly in the capital city. It is in Stockholm, the self-branded “Capital of Scandinavia” where “world-class city” aspirations are most clearly manifested through city marketing and planning processes which aim to beautify urban space with a view to drawing tourists and mobile capital to the city (Cele 2015). But it is also in Stockholm that some of the most visible trends towards ethnic and socio-economic segregation can be witnessed (Grundström and Molina 2016). The two areas of Stockholm which form the geographical focus of this paper, Rinkeby and Södermalm, in many ways embody the increasing fragmentation of recent decades. Rinkeby, an area born out of a modernistic planning initiative of the 1960s, has even since relatively early in its history, housed a largely immigrant population (Nyström and Lundström 2006), and the proportion of foreign born residents in the area has continued to grow since the 1970s, so that now the percentage of residents in the larger Rinkeby-Tensta region with a foreign background is around 83%, the highest in Stockholm (Stockholms Stad 2017a). It has been largely characterised within the Swedish imaginary as an area suffering from a number of social issues, and as such is often drawn upon to illustrate the failures of Swedish integration policies, although such one-sided narratives are frequently challenged by local residents (Pred 2000; Ritz 2016). Whilst these narratives of Rinkeby are somewhat influenced by a spatialisation of racial discourse (Pred 2000), socio-economic indicators suggest that residents experience generally higher levels of unemployment, lower income, a higher sense of insecurity in public spaces and lower confidence in the local police than in other urban areas of Stockholm (Brå 2018; Rinkeby-Kista Stadsdelsförvaltning 2018). It has been argued that neoliberal politics and economics has contributed to the problems facing the area, through privatisation processes (which have garnered protests from local resident groups) and through a fragmented and decentralised response to social issues such as integration (Lindell et al. 2019; Mack 2019).

Södermalm is a larger area, more central to the city of Stockholm, which has also undergone considerable demographic changes in recent years. Since the process of urbanisation began in Södermalm in the 17th century, and up until recent decades, it had held the image of a traditional working-class area. However, the shift towards neoliberalisation within Swedish housing politics has contributed to an intense period of gentrification, allowing rental prices in the area to rise considerably, and producing a shift in the local geography of tenure types. The process of gentrification has been co-produced alongside a powerful cultural representation of Södermalm as the cultural and “hipster” centre of Stockholm, exemplified by the fact Vogue Magazine in 2014 named Södermalm on in its list of the “15 coolest neighbourhoods in the world” (Gee 2014). Most recently though, even this idealisation of Södermalm as home to a “specific popular culture blending radicalness with a happy-go-lucky spirit” (Franzén 2005) is now giving way, as local demographics have shifted towards an increasingly ageing, wealthy population. These two areas represent two sides of Stockholm in terms of
ethnic and socioeconomic demographics, with the highest and lowest percentage of foreign-born residents in Rinkeby and Södermalm respectively (Stockholms stad 2017b) and very different cultural narratives tied to each place. As such, they provide an opportunity to explore the ways in which begging practices by vulnerable EU citizens, themselves a highly racialised group, are being policed in ways that are sensitive to local spatial orders.

Research Design
The research design for this paper has evolved to address a number of concerns raised in discussions surrounding the critical study of homeless geographies. With the aim of foregrounding the experiences of homeless groups themselves in research on homeless geographies (following DeVerteuil et al. 2009) the initial core of the research centred around fieldwork carried out in Stockholm between 2017 and 2019 with vulnerable EU citizens begging in the city, including 22 recorded in-depth interviews and a number of shorter unrecorded interviews and follow-up conversations. It was this initial data collection and the reports of policing practices in certain areas which triggered, to quote DeVerteuil (2019:1055), the now somewhat “Pavlovian“ response to turn to the literature on revanchism for conceptual clarity. However, following May and Cloke’s (2014) call to look beyond broad revanchist formulations to address the “messy middle ground” of homeless management, a decision was taken to delve deeper into the logics driving police work on the ground by seeking interviews with members of the police force in different areas of the city. The empirical material presented here is also supported by four years of wider research amongst vulnerable EU citizens in Stockholm, including a mixture of ethnographic observation and participation at meetings, classes and events involving members of this group, and interviews with a wide range of key informants and service providers in the city.

Finally, the decision to geographically delimit the empirical focus of this paper to the areas of Rinkeby and Södermalm, was made in an attempt to balance spatial diversity with the possibility for analytical depth, following an awareness raised by scholars including Lawton (2018) and Stuart (2014) that research on homeless geographies has tended to focus on the showcase spaces of neoliberal urbanism where the incentive to sanitise space of “unwanted elements“ is strongest, neglecting the marginal areas which might provide examples of less punitive management practices. The overall methodological approach draws on recent works promoting a relational comparative approach to urban studies, in which urban spaces and processes are opened up for comparison in a way that remains cognisant of their interdependent, relational histories and geographies (Ward 2010). In this context, “reading across” two local spaces provides an opportunity to explore the coming-together of local contingencies with broader path-dependencies, for instance by exploring where policing practices on the ground are guided by both local place-based concerns and a wider politics with regards to neoliberalism, globalisation and migration control. The research findings that follow begin with a report of policing practices in the two areas of
Stockholm from the perspective of those vulnerable EU-citizens begging on the streets.

**Experiences of Policing Practices in Södermalm and Rinkeby**

The experiences of policing practices reported by vulnerable EU citizens begging in these two areas of the city were markedly different. In Södermalm, the presence of police was clearly felt and all those interviewed in the area reported at some point being told to move by police when sitting on the ground to beg. Whilst reports of these interactions varied, in “milder” cases individuals reported police officers coming and signalling with their hands while saying “go, go”. Individuals often reported having their possessions thrown away by police if they left them on the street at any point and some reported having their possessions actively taken from them while they sat with them. Due to the lack of a shared language with police or pre-existing familiarity with Swedish laws, many had pieced together an understanding of what was allowed and not through these interactions with police, lending extra salience to Lipsky’s (2010) claim that street-level bureaucrats can essentially “make” policy through their daily practices. In reality, almost all those interviewed in Södermalm expressed some fear for the local police, in response to what they reported as being aggressive and often violent practices. It became clear after a number of interviews that this violence was mostly perpetuated by one particular police officer, who was perceived by many individuals to be targeting them on racist grounds. Reports of this kind are too numerous to relay in detail here, but include repeated acts of physical aggression, often directed towards Roma women, such as pulling individuals by their hair, twisting their wrists and physically preventing them from collecting “pant” from public dustbins. One woman claims that he prevented her from sitting in a McDonald’s when she had ordered food: “He came in and took my food ... and he put it in the bin and said ‘go’ ... He went to the counter and said ‘don’t allow them to be here’ ... I think he doesn’t like Roma people”.

Whilst this particular officer appeared to be responsible for much of the fear amongst respondents in the area, there was also a practice being carried out more generally by officers in Södermalm, which many of the respondents were acutely aware of. This practice consisted of police taking individuals who were begging on the streets, putting them in a police van, and driving them out of central Stockholm to be dropped off in another, unknown location from where they would have to find their way back into the city. Since many in this group lacked in basic reading and writing skills, a secure knowledge of the city, a smart phone with internet, a shared language with locals, or sufficient means to pay for transport, this process was often extremely traumatic. Indeed, even those who had not experienced it first-hand were often acutely aware of it. Angelin, a widower in his 60s who due to poor health could only move slowly with the help of a walking stick, despite never having been directly removed by police, explained why he still got up and left if he ever saw the police:
If he takes me a 100 km away ... I won’t know how to get back here. I don’t know the whole of Sweden, I just know this area, and I am afraid because I have heart problems. I’m afraid that I won’t get back if the police come. I don’t have a friend here. It’s just me, no one else.

Many interpreted the practice as an intentional attempt to cause distress. Maria, a Romanian Roma woman in her 40s, when I asked if more than one person was ever taken at a time, responded: “Why would he take two of us? If he takes two people we would figure out a way together, but if he takes only one then people will be more scared”.

In stark contrast to these experiences in Södermalm, those in Rinkeby reported having had little or no interaction with local police there, with none of them reporting being moved on when begging, busking or sleeping nearby. The only person to report experiences perceived to be negative with police was a man who complained at his treatment when he had tried to earn money through selling goods informally on a street just off the main square. All other respondents had either positive stories of interactions with police in the area (“they’re civilised and nice ... sometimes they come with food”) or were simply unaffected by their presence (“a lot of police pass by but they never talk with me ... I don’t have any business with the police”). Indeed, where in Södermalm, many reported having their possessions removed by police, during a couple of days of ethnographic observation in the main square in Rinkeby, during which there was a recurrent police presence, a small group of individuals from Romania sat in a passage just off the square with a salvaged bed and set of living room furniture! Cozmin, a man from this group, who for a long time had busked with an accordion in the main square and frequently left his instrument on the ground right in front of the exit to the metro station, seemed perplexed at my suggestion that the police might have a problem with this.

The fact that many respondents in the gentrified area of Södermalm reported experiencing what they deemed to be hostile policing practices to prevent them begging or using public spaces for other reasons, whilst those in Rinkeby, an area somewhat peripheral to the gentrified heart of Stockholm, were left relatively unchecked by police there, would immediately seem to lend support to an interpretation within a traditional punitive framing. In this interpretation, the police as the disciplinary arm of the state, work to defend the gentrification frontier (Smith 1996), helping to sanitise the spaces of capital accumulation from those groups (or actions) that might stand in conflict with the aesthetic ideals of the imagined “world-class city”. However, rather than taking this interpretation at face value, this paper now turns to look more carefully at the “messy middle ground” in this context (May and Cloke 2014) through considering the logics ostensibly underlying these police interventions, and the ways in which these intersect with police agency and local community concerns to produce the geographies of policing described above.

**Policing through Pedestrianism**

At the time of writing, despite ongoing political debate, begging remains legal in Sweden at the national level, and whilst some municipalities have now moved to
implement local begging bans, this is not the case in either Rinkeby or Södermalm. However, public order laws (*ordningslagen*) provide some power to police officers to disrupt the activity of begging under certain conditions. These legal guidelines are somewhat vague in nature, but provide the police powers to intervene in case an individual or group is, without a permit, using a public space *in a way that is inconsistent with the purpose for which the site is intended, or which is not generally accepted* (Sveriges Riksdag 1993). The legal article goes on to state that a permit is not required *if the site is used only temporarily and to an insignificant extent and without impinging upon someone else’s condition*. Paragraph 13 of the Police Act (Sveriges Riksdag 1984) might then be invoked to intervene: *If someone, through their behaviour, disturbs the public order or poses an immediate danger to it, a policeman, when necessary for maintaining the order, may reject or remove them from a certain area or space.* It is this which has been invoked around Södermalm when individuals have been picked up from the street and driven out of the central city in a process known as “avlägsnande” (roughly translated as “removal”), a practice traditionally employed in the Swedish context to prevent the escalation of violence amongst sports fans or protestors.

These guidelines leave considerable room for the agency of individual officers to determine their level of intervention against those using public spaces for the purpose of begging. However, since the act of begging itself remains legal, the use of police power against individuals begging on the streets has been restricted, according to my interviews carried out with police officials, to occasions in which individuals are perceived to be disturbing the public order either through begging in a way deemed to be aggressive, or through occupying public space in a way that is seen to cause an obstruction for pedestrians. According to a representative for Södermalm Police, interventions against individuals deemed to be begging “aggressively” on the streets are very rare, and so essentially, the only reason that any vulnerable EU citizen on the street would be (re)moved by police, was if an officer made the judgement that they were in some way blocking pedestrian access and could be a hindrance for the disabled or people with prams. This claim is supported by a booklet produced by the police to guide officers on the streets in their interventions towards vulnerable EU citizens living and sleeping in public space, in which it is stated that whilst begging on the streets is not an offence and requires no sort of permit, *begging which takes place over an extended period of time in one place and in a way that significantly impedes pedestrians may meet the requirement for a permit*, and as such, may be cause for police officers to make a judgement and to intervene (Polismyndigheten 2017). The same booklet also contains a section for the police to use in their duties, in an attempt to overcome communication problems, containing text in Romanian and Bulgarian, with photos identifying Roma individuals and their possessions apparently blocking pedestrian paths, with red crosses over them.

As such, what Blomley (2010a) describes as a logic of “pedestrianism”, that sidewalks are often governed with reference to ostensibly apolitical rules which aim to promote free flow of pedestrian traffic, is key to police justifications for the interventions described in this paper. Notably, however, in a step away from the barest forms of pedestrianist logic, support has been sought through an appeal to the
rights of the disabled. As part of a campaign entitled “A sidewalk accessible for everyone”, police have highlighted the potential obstructions posed to disabled and blind pedestrians by those that sit on the street to beg and used this as justification for preventing people from doing so (Carp 2016). Examples of police reports filed after “removals” of individuals who are begging also state the motivation to be that the individual created an unnatural hindrance to handicapped people. It might be noted that Sebastian Nicula, spokesperson for DHR, an organisation in Sweden for individuals with disabilities, publicly rejected this police campaign as mere concoc-

tion on the part of the police, stating that for disabled people in Stockholm, people sitting on the street to beg has never been a problem and will never be a problem (Gelin 2016). Lillemor Högsellius, spokesperson for SFR, a Stockholm based organisation for blind people, made the very pertinent point in the same newspaper report that while it is possible that individuals sitting on the street to beg could pose a problem for blind people, her experience in the city was that those that sat and begged would make their presence known or move if they saw a blind person approaching. This highlights a key assumption often hidden in the logic of pedestrianism; that a person sitting on the street should be treated like a static object because they will act like a static object and fail to move when needed.5

The question remains, if it were the case that pedestrianism was a purely apolitical, technocratic approach to the governance of people and things in urban space, would we not expect it to be relatively evenly enacted across city spaces? Whilst policing priorities will always differ across city space (and this is certainly the case between these two areas), it is worth noting the extent to which it has been unevenly enacted in the two areas presented here. Where in Södermalm, a logic of pedestrianism has provided justification for a number of seemingly disproportionate police interventions against individuals (and their belongings) on the street, in Rinkeby it seemed not to be invoked at all. The urban morphology in these two areas certainly plays some role in this, and Rinkeby’s large open square where many of the informants spent their time may create less of a need for interventions based on logic of pedestrianism than the sidewalks of Södermalm, but the examples previously given of the furniture in the passageway just off the square in Rinkeby, or Cozmin, whose accordion sat untouched directly in front of the exit to the metro station, provide concrete examples of situations which might demand pedestrianist interventions. So whilst at face value, it is a logic of pedestrianism alone which motivates police interventions into the begging practices of vulnerable EU citizens in Stockholm, the diverse experiences of those begging in these two areas above strongly suggest that more is needed to explain the uneven geographies of police intervention across city space. It will be argued next that understanding the ways in which pedestrianism is enacted in place, mediated through the discretion of individual officers, is fundamental to understanding the uneven geographies it produces.

**Police Discretion and Pedestrianism In Place**

Whilst pedestrianism as a rationality of government in itself remains neutral to local socio-political contexts, when it comes its implementation to produce a
spatial order in practice, place matters. This is especially true when the agency is left to individual officers to judge how and when to prioritise interventions based on this logic. As previously highlighted, the two areas of Stockholm taken as case studies here are markedly divergent in terms of their ethnic and socio-economic demographics. As such, the presence of vulnerable EU citizens in areas such as Södermalm, with the lowest percentage of foreign born residents in Stockholm, carries a heightened challenge to normative notions of place, strongly tied as they inevitably are to conceptions of race and class (Capers 2009). Indeed, Hansson (2019:727) in his extensive psychoanalytical review of the Swedish society’s response to the presence of vulnerable EU citizens on city streets, has argued that much of the conflict arising from their use of public space has stemmed from the sensation of a “transgression of an aesthetic and normative order”, and this sense of transgression is clearly more visible in areas like Södermalm. In Rinkeby, with the highest percentage of foreign-born residents in Stockholm, the “aesthetic and normative order” of place is to a large extent already defined in contrast to notions of middle-class “Swedishness” (see e.g. Stroud 2004). These local specificities filter through to inform policing practices in both direct and indirect ways. In the most direct sense, police work to maintain public order in a way that is always informed by “commonsense geographies” which through their relationship to the local place in which they work “inform their decisions on whom to deem ‘out of place’” (Capers 2009:66). But modern community policing strategies also work to reinforce these processes by providing room for the concerns of local residents to inform policing priorities.

Interviews with local police revealed that a recent restructuring of police organisation in Stockholm has placed heightened emphasis on local police districts creating their own set of problem formulations and priorities, stemming from local community concerns. One important tool in this process is Sweden’s “trygghetsmätning” (roughly translated as public “safety measurement”), a government survey sent out every three years to a selection of residents in Swedish cities, with a focus on real and perceived safety concerns. The results, divided in Stockholm into smaller districts of the city, provide the police and local politicians with a gauge of local perceived problems to be addressed. In an interview with Anders Lindberg, a representative for Södermalm police district, he claimed that the presence of vulnerable EU citizens had been a keen issue in the district because the results of the “trygghetsmätning” suggested that residents of Södermalm were disproportionately “afraid of people begging on the street” compared with other districts of the city. He also suggested that the older, more affluent residents who had come to form a large demographic in the area in recent years, were particularly vocal in bringing their concerns directly to the police. Similarly, a representative for the police district which incorporates Rinkeby suggested that whilst they did receive complaints about begging from locals, “I think the question is more important to locals [in Södermalm]”. Whilst Lindberg insisted that local concerns about begging would not fundamentally change policing practices whilst it remained legal to beg, and that individuals were moved only when deemed to be hindering pedestrians, he also suggested that his department was not “focusing as much now on trying to keep the streets clean outside grocery
stores” because there had been “a shift in normality perception” amongst the wider population. This quotation demonstrates how in practice, the discretion of officers in their invocation of pedestrianism is informed by local norms and perceptions of begging. This is one important way in which the ostensibly neutral logic of pedestrianism intersects on the ground with potentially exclusionary dynamics amongst local populations in a way that can perpetuate the production of uneven policing geographies.

One element in the production of these local differences, in line with the fragmented neoliberal processes which have guided recent changes in these areas, is shifts in housing tenure landscapes. In Södermalm there has been a conversion of a large part of the housing stock from rental to ownership models. The promotion of home-ownership psychologically and economically increases the stakes for local residents in safeguarding surrounding public spaces which are perceived to be safe and attractive and which maintain exchange values (Harvey 1976). Kelling and Wilson’s (1982) “unchecked panhandler” thus is the “broken window” that threatens more in gentrifying spaces with higher degrees of homeownership. A second element relevant to policing practices in Rinkeby is the effect that years of fragmented neoliberal governance has had on the relationship between police and residents there. Whilst Rinkeby has received investments in recent years both in terms of social projects and physical planning, Swedish neoliberal governance has replaced the old social-democratic ideals of redressing class imbalance through top-down planning with increasingly fragmented, ad-hoc interventions guided by a plurality of local actors (Mack 2019). These fragmented responses have not been enough to curb the increasing marginalisation of these areas from the rest of the city, with organised crime groups increasing their local influence as police fight to regain control. Residents in areas such as Rinkeby have organised against neoliberal interventions whilst articulating a view that they have been racially victimised by police, and villainised in media portrayals (Lindell et al. 2019). These processes have culminated more than once with riots in Rinkeby and surrounding areas. This means that police in areas such as Rinkeby, aside from having other pressing priorities, must work hard to rebuild trust, with a focus on “meeting people as people” in the words of one local police officer interviewed. In this sense, where police in Södermalm may find themselves working to maintain a neoliberal ideal of sanitised space, in Rinkeby police are working hard to redress deep divisions entrenched after decades of neoliberal suburban decline. In this context, targeting the passive begging practices of vulnerable EU citizens, one racialised group amongst many others in Rinkeby, may risk deepening divisions.

But as previously suggested, police neither simply reflect local community concerns, nor are their practices “reducible to the broader objectives of the state” (DeVerteuil and Wilton 2009:465). There is also the possibility for individual officers, as street-level bureaucrats with the agency to interpret laws and guidelines with their own discretion, to escalate their interventions in line with their individual political positionalities. Indeed, Lindberg, police representative in Södermalm, conceded a worry that certain police officers in his district allowed their own political views to influence their priorities when it came to addressing the presence of vulnerable EU citizens:
... sometimes you get signals that one or two are having this as their personal priority. And I’m not sure if that follows in how they voted in the last election ... but I think with the polarisation of the Swedish politics ... I think that also effects the police authorities.

In this sense, those individual officers enacting aggressive policing practices towards vulnerable EU citizens in Södermalm, can use pedestrianist logic as a depoliticised framework within which to mobilise their agency in order to produce punitive landscapes, driven by their own normative conceptions of who and what is “out of place” in their district, reflecting wider national political debates.

However, Lindberg also clarified that while some officers may have “succumb to the latest ... polarisation”, most officers did their best to remain objective, and that in fact, when the results from the “trygghetsmätning” suggesting a “fear of beggars” reached local politicians, that it was the police who were forced to push back against the local politicians’ calls for police interventions, with Lindberg reporting that he was forced to say “woah, actually begging is not against the law, we are not going to work with it”. Christoffer Bohman, police representative in Rinkeby, signalled a similar disinclination to use the power of public order laws to control the street activity of vulnerable EU citizens, except in the case of a “serious disturbance”, despite some nascent pressure after it had become a “focus question in elections”. In this context, the agency granted police officers also allows them to push back in acts of “ethical insurgency” (May et al. 2019) against pressure from local politicians or residents to enact punitive interventions grounded in political unease at the presence of vulnerable EU citizens on the streets. This highlights the often-ambivalent role played by street-level bureaucrats such as police in the production of contingent landscapes of revanchism and support (see also Çankaya 2020). The ways in which revanchist tendencies in practice are mediated through the agency of street-level bureaucrats such as police is an area which warrants continued attention within the literature seeking to map the contours of punitivity towards the visibly poor and homeless in contemporary cities.

**Conclusions: Repositioning Stockholm in the Global Trend Towards “Post-Revanchist Cities”**

Through engaging directly with the experiences of vulnerable EU citizens begging in two diverse areas of Stockholm, as well as the logics driving police interventions towards this group, this paper has revealed some of the contingent ways in which uneven punitive landscapes of homelessness can be produced on the ground. For those seeking livelihoods through begging in the wealthier, gentrified area of Södermalm, policing practices were experienced as predominantly hostile, with actions such as the “removals” of individuals begging on the street often perceived to be driven by exclusionary and sometimes racist intent, whilst in Rinkeby, a far more laissez-faire approach was reported. This paper has attempted to understand some of the ways in which this ostensible expression of uneven revanchist urbanism has been produced on the ground, pointing to the ways in which pedestrianism, as a depoliticised rationality with which to govern space, has
framed police interventions, creating the legal space for punitive practices to be enacted in spatially sensitive ways. A certain degree of path-dependency is evident in the production of these uneven policing landscapes, as police discretion is always guided by existing normative geographies tied to different spaces (Herbert 1996) and by the concerns of local communities who have become increasingly sorted into socio-economic and ethnic clusters during the past decades of broadly neoliberal urban reforms. Importantly though, the differences in policing practices across space remained largely contingent, with the discretion of police officers as street-level bureaucrats influential in determining the extent to which these practices have trended towards the punitive, due to their agency to escalate or soften interventions in line with their own political convictions.

How then, can the Swedish case contribute to broader discussions surrounding punitive urbanism and the purported shift towards a “post-revanchist” city (DeVerteuil 2019; Murphy 2009) identified in some parts of the global North? In order to hint at an answer to this question, we might now take a step back from the relatively narrow empirical focus of this paper and to reposition these processes in relation to broader trends in the wider Swedish context. As previously mentioned, begging remains legal in the areas of Stockholm on which this paper has focused, but this is no longer the case in an increasing number of municipalities across the country. Indeed, that the introduction of a national ban on begging in now supported by two of the three largest political parties in Sweden, is testament to the growing influence of the ethno-nationalist Swedish Democrats. Neil Smith (2009) was quick to conceptualise the rising tide of right-wing populism across the west in the language of a revanchism that had jumped scale, and whilst the mainstream political discourse in Sweden has not tended to reflect the emotive and vengeful language Smith associated with revanchism, the instigation of begging bans certainly suggests a familiar attempt to reclaim city streets from unwanted elements, with a national politics of exclusion becoming entangled with local policing of urban order.

The ambivalence characterising the “benevolent violence” of the state’s response to the presence of these groups on Swedish streets (Barker 2017) should be understood partly in terms of a contradiction produced by the path-dependency of Swedish welfare politics of the last century meeting the neoliberal reforms of recent decades, which have left many of the long-held ideals of the Swedish welfare state more “discursive” than “actual” (Hansson and Mitchell 2018:34). But then where, in this case, are the more long-term, supportive interventions which are said to make possible the punitive (DeVerteuil 2014) in the emergent “post-revanchist city”? Whilst this paper has not intended to comprehensively map a balance between supportive and punitive interventions towards this group (police work inherently involves elements of punitivism so a methodological focus on policing will always provide more room for the punitive to come to light), the lack of comprehensive supportive interventions towards this group has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Amnesty International 2018). One relatively simple reason can be suggested as to why supportive interventions have not been more forthcoming. Calls for longer-term support to be offered for this group, who retain national citizenship elsewhere, have been consistently rejected on the
grounds that the long-term solutions (real or imagined) lie in their home-coun-
tries (Hansson 2019). As such, while it has been suggested elsewhere that the
supportive is needed to temper the exclusionary in large part because “homeless
people cannot be made to just leave” (Mitchell 2017:109), the underlying logic
at work in this case suggests that through a mixture of punitive controls such as
the criminalisation of begging, and without sufficient supportive interventions
such as long-term shelter, this group in fact can be made to “just leave”.

So whilst the police practices depicted in this paper, mobilised within a logic of
pedestrianism and guided by police discretion, may have given rise to contingent
forms of punitivism, the wider trend appears to be towards a formalisation and
rescaling of these punitive practices. In this context, and especially if a national
begging ban should be implemented, the police will find themselves (willingly or
not) positioned as local agents of a national politics of exclusion. As such, their
agency as street-level bureaucrats to escalate or soften the punitive landscapes
being created becomes increasingly important. And if this trend can persist in
Sweden, there is good reason to believe that such trends might be emergent in
other contexts in which individuals occupying public spaces in search of liveli-
hoods do so with a citizenship status which makes them “displaceable” and so
makes the punitive tenable. The emergence of “post-revanchist” cities in some
parts of the world may then be only half the story, with others simply forging
paths towards a fresh assortment of “neo-revanchist” urban landscapes.

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Endnotes
1 Despite being simultaneously vague but wordy, and perhaps problematically ascribing
the quality “vulnerability” to a group of diverse individuals, the term “vulnerable EU citi-
zens” is employed throughout this paper following its adoption by NGOs and government
agencies in recent years, for lack of a less problematic signifier for this broad group of indi-
viduals, most of whom, but not all, self-define as Roma.
2 I generally avoid referring to specific individuals in this group as “homeless”, since this
term is often challenged on the basis that almost all have a home in their country of origin
(albeit often far from what would be considered “adequate housing” from a human rights
perspective). I do however use terms such as “homeless geographies” throughout this
paper, since whilst in Stockholm, almost all live in varying states of homelessness, and it is
this state which in many ways defines their spatial relations in the city and allows their
experiences to be put in conversation with experiences of homeless individuals elsewhere
in the literature.
3 Pseudonyms are employed in this paper to protect the anonymity of respondents, except
in cases where explicit approval was given to use real names.
4 All translations from Swedish are the author’s own. Translated text is displayed in italics
without quotation marks.
5 It might be noted that during the period of time in which this research was carried out,
Stockholm, alongside many other cities around the world, saw the sudden arrival of
thousands of “e-scooters”. These scooters, at the time of writing, remain scattered all over the city’s sidewalks in a manner that makes the removal of an individual person begging, under a logic of pedestrianism, far more difficult to reconcile with a sense of proportionality.

It is worth noting that the Swedish word “trygghet” does not translate neatly to the word “safety”, but rather something closer to a “feeling of security”. This difference is one which is relevant to consider when discussing public responses to the homeless, which are often grounded in a desire to avoid uncomfortable encounters as much as in real safety concerns (Laurenson and Collins 2007). For this reason, I continue to use the Swedish name “trygghetsmätning” in this paper rather than a crude English translation.

References


