Scandinavian Working-Class Comics

The aim of this chapter is to argue that the application of the concept of working-class comics – understood as a sub-category of comics, as a strand within the tradition of working-class literature, or as both – is valuable in the analysis of Scandinavian comics. Above all, it can help make visible comics and uses of comics that are otherwise easily overlooked in academic scholarship. Thereby it can not only make possible a better understanding of the comics landscape in Scandinavia, but also of the relationship between comics, class, and politics in the region. Furthermore, the concept of working-class comics brings to the fore important questions about the relationship between comics and literature and between the research field of comics studies and the discipline of literary studies. The chapter's focus will lie mainly on Swedish comics, and especially on comics in membership magazines published by the unions belonging to The Swedish Trade Union Confederation.

Comics and Working-Class Literature

Several prominent commentators – such as comics artists Chris Ware and Hervé Barulea (better known under his pen name Baru), and comics artist and scholar Will Allred – have claimed that there is a special bond between comics and the working class, and that comics can even be viewed as a working-class artform (see Nilsson 2019, 1, 7). Similar arguments have also been put forward in Scandinavia. For example, Polish-Swedish comics artist Daria Bogdanska has stated that comics is a good medium for working-class people like herself who have grown up without access to literature and who do not have much cultural capital but nevertheless want to tell their stories (Bogdanska and Nilsson 2018). Am illustration comics form of thoughts not much different from those expressed by Bogdanska can be found in Swedish comics artist Mats Källblad's semi-autobiographical graphic novel *Hundra år i samma klass* [*One Hundred Years in the Same Class*], where comics are associated with the working class and literature with the bourgeoisie (see Nilsson 2019).

Furthermore, there is certainly no shortage of comics thematizing working-class life. Internationally well-known examples include Richard F. Outcaults *The Yellow Kid*, Reg

Smythe's *Andy Capp*, and Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor*.[1] In a Scandinavian context, one could mention Norwegian comics artist Tron J. Stavås' "Gutta på gølvet" [The Lads on the Factory Floor], which, according to Stavås' (Stavås 2022) webpage is a comic about "helt vanlige industriarbeidare på en helt vanlig norsk fabrikk" (ordinary workers in an ordinary Norwegian factory). Other examples include the above-mentioned *Hundra år i samma klass* by Källblad, which is set in a rural working-class environment and explicitly thematizes class conflicts, or Bogdanska's *Wage Slaves* which describes her experiences of working as a paperless immigrant in restaurants.

However, while it is certainly not difficult to find examples of comics that have strong links to the working class, it is of course preposterous to argue that comics in general is a working-class artform. Comics readers and artists come from all classes, and experiences and perspectives connected to different social groups are represented in comic form. Therefore, a more productive idea than the one about comics' special bond to the working class is to recognize that there are class divisions within the artform, and that some, but far from all, comics have a close relationship to the working class. One way of doing this goes through inspiration from literary studies and its theorization of working-class literature.

There is no universally accepted definition of working-class literature. In fact, it has been the object of disagreement, debate, and conflict among scholars and critics for more than a century. Not the least, many commentators have promoted strict and narrow definitions that have exclude works that *could* be viewed as working-class literature. One reason for this is the narrow geographical and historical scope characterizing much scholarship about working-class literature (see e.g. Perera 2014, 4). Another reason has been the tendency within literary studies to give priority to works considered to be of especially high value (Nilsson 2022a).

In recent years, however, there has been a massive increase in interest in the concept of working-class literature, both in the study of many national literatures and as a literary-

[1] Prominent historian and theorist of class, Eric Hobsbawm (1978, 281–282), has even argued that Andy Capp's cap has become an important symbol for "a common style of proletarian life" that was dominant in Britain from the 1880s to the 1950s.

historical/theoretical concept with global reach.[2] One result of this has been an increased awareness of the fact that working-class literature is a highly heterogenous phenomenon that varies both between contexts and over time (see especially Lennon and Nilsson 2017, 2020; Nilsson and Lennon 2016; Perera 2014). This is not the least true in Scandinavia, where there has been a veritable boom in research about working-class literature in the new millennium.[3] One important feature of this research has been a willingness to widen the concept of working-class literature so that it can encompass new kinds of literature, another its application in contexts where it has hitherto not been used, but where it can generate new perspectives and questions. This includes the analysis of comics as working-class literature, in particular in Sweden, where scholars have argued that works by comics artists such as Hanna Petersson, Mats Källblad, and Mats Jonsson should be viewed working-class literature (Nilsson 2016, 139–146; Ernst 2017, 245; Olsson 2022).

These analyses draw on open and flexible definitions of working-class literature that allow for a high degree of heterogeneity and variation. One such definition has been provided by Lars Furuland, who is generally viewed as the founding father and most prominent representative of research about working-class literature in Sweden. He has argued that working-class literature is literature by, about, and for workers, but that not all these criteria need to be met (Furuland 1984). Another prominent scholar of Scandinavian working-class literature, Beata Agrell, has proposed that we speak of working-class *literariness* rather than about working-class literature. Rather than classifying a text as working-class literature with the point of departure in given criteria, she argues, we should study how it can be used or interpreted as such (Agrell 2017, 35). Yet another scholar, Magnus Nilsson (2006), defines working-class literature as literature whose reception is influenced by the fact that readers connect it to the working class. For example, if the fact that a novel is written by a worker affects our interpretation of it, that novel could be placed in the category of working-class literature. And the same goes for poetry that is written for workers, or plays that criticize

[2] Important publications include the following: (Pierse 2017; Coles and Lauter 2017; Goodridge and Keegan 2017; Lennon and Nilsson 2017, 2020; Perera 2014)
[3] Some of the most important publications are: (Hamm, Nestås Mathisen, and Neple 2017; Fahlgren, Mattsson, and Williams 2020; Nilsson 2014; Arping 2011; Mattsson 2017; Yde 2019; Lund 2020).

society from a working-class perspective, as long as these things contribute in significant ways to our understanding of the works in question.

With the point of departure in these definitions it is possible to include several different kinds of comics in the category of working-class literature. One of them is comics that are set in working-class milieus. The above-mentioned *Gutta på gølvet* is a good example of this. However, within literary studies, working-class literature is seldom defined only or primarily with the point of departure in motif or subject matter. It is generally not because they depict workers that literary works are placed the category of working-class literature, but rather because they describe these workers and the worlds they inhabit from an ideological perspective that expresses sympathy with the working-class. For example, Furuland has argued that the fundamental feature of working-class literature is its ideological content and its anchorage in labour-movement politics (Furuland and Svedjedal 2006, 24). Such an ideological anchorage is of course much less common in Scandinavian comics than is the depiction of workers or working-class environments. *Gutta på gølvet*, for example, is not promoting working-class politics, or even expressing much sympathy with workers. On the contrary, since the jokes are often at the expense of the workers, who are generally portrayed as being lazy and stupid, the comic could be understood as reproducing and disseminating negative stereotypes about the working-class. Thus, it has little in common with traditional Scandinavian working-class literature, which in general, while often being less explicitly political than working-class literatures from other parts of the world, has emancipatory class-political ambitions. Hence, it makes little sense to categorise *Gutta på gølve* as a working-class literature.[4]

There are, however, several examples of Scandinavian comics that do describe or criticize society from a working-class perspective, or even promote labour-movement politics. This includes some rather main-stream comics. A recent example is writer Kalle Lind and cartoonist Jimmy Wallin's *Statarna och deras (inte fullt så) underbara äventyr* (The estate workers and their [not very wonderful] adventures). In hitherto three albums, Lind and Wallin describe – in a very humorous, but also didactic way – the history of the rural

[4] The same is true also for many other comics depicting working-class milieus. *Andy Capp*, for example, gives an even more negative view of the working class.

proletariat in Sweden during the early twentieth century in a way that emphasizes – as it says on the back cover of the first album *Rovor och champagne* – the ”misär och orättvisor” (misery and incjustices) that it suffered (Lind and Wallin 2019). The album also ends with an article about the real historical conditions under which estate workers lived in Sweden until 1945, where it is underlined that they had no rights and that they lacked “mat, värme, lön och […] värdighet” (food, heat, salary, and […] dignity) (Lind and Wallin 2019, 78–79). Furthermore, it is accentuated that the humour is not “på bekostnad av andras elände” (at the expense of others’ misery) but a means for making people interested in the history of the estate workers:

> Efter att du läst det här albumet har du troligen tänkt mer på statare än vad du gjort de senaste femton åren. Karl Marx ska ha sagt att historien alltid upprepar sig – första gången som tragedy, andra gången som fars. Det här är farsversionen. (Lind and Wallin 2019, 79)
>
> After hiving read this album you have probably thought more about the estate workers than you have done during the last fifteen years. Karl Marx allegedly said that history always repeats itself – the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. This is the farce version.

However, in contemporary Scandinavia sympathetic portrayals in comics form of the working-class are usually not found in commercial comic books, but in more highbrow publications or in left-wing periodicals. A good example is “Sjakket – streger fra pladsen” (The Gang – Lines from the [work-]place) by Jakob Mathiassen, which was published in the Danish communist newspaper *Dagbladet Arbeideren* in 2010. Another example is *På äventyr i senkapitalismen* [On adventure in late capitalism] from 2022, which, among other things, criticizes the so-called gig economy. Like Källblad’s *Hundra år i samma klass* and Bogdanska’s *Wage Slaves*, *På äventyr i senkapitalismen* was published by Galago, Sweden’s leading publisher of aesthetically ambitious comics and graphic novels.

Several of the comics mentioned above could very well be viewed as working-class literature, because of their ideological anchorage in the working class and the labour

movement. Other comics could be placed in the tradition of working-class literature because they more or less explicitly claim to be connected to or part of it. One example of this can be found in Lind and Wallin's *Statarna och deras (inte fullt så) underbara äventyr*. In the concluding article about the history of the estate workers, it is highlighted that this topic has been addressed by well-known working-class writers such as Ivar Lo-Johansson and Moa Martinson (Lind and Wallin 2019, 79). Other examples can be found in the works of prominent Swedish comics artist Mats Jonsson. Nina Ernst (2017, 143–146) has pointed out, in her dissertation about Swedish autobiographical graphic novels, that in his works, Jonsson mentions several well-known working-class authors. His graphic novel *Pojken i skogen* [The Boy in the Forest] even ends with a thanks to the perhaps most well-known Swedish working-class author of all times – the above-mentioned Lo-Johansson – for "inspiration during the making of the book" (Ernst 2017, 173; Jonsson 2018, 233). Jonsson is also member of an organization trying to promote Lo-Johansson's works and has often made artworks for it.[5]

Furthermore, comics artist Tommy Sundvall has argued that several contemporary comics artist – he mentions especially Daria Bogdanska and Henrik Bromander – can be described as "proletärförfattare" (literally: proletarian writers) (Engström 2020). Both of them (and also Hanna Petersson) have also stated that they feel comfortable when their works are referred to as working-class literature in comics form (Nilsson 2016, 139). It is also worth noting that Källblad is a member of Föreningen Arbetarskrivare [The Association for Worker-Writers], which aims at promoting working-class literature, and that he has published both comics and articles in its journal *Klass* (Class).

There are also comics that connect more implicitly to the tradition of working-class literature. For example, Ernst (2017, 145) argues that the mere fact that working-class heritage is a common motif in Jonsson's work establishes a relationship to working-class literature. Many of the comics mentioned above could also be said to fulfil functions similar to those associated more traditional kinds of working-class literature. For example,

[5] It is also worth noting that Källblad is a member of Föreningen Arbetarskrivare [The Association for Worker-Writers], which aims at promoting working-class literature, and that he has published an autobiographical article its literary journal, *Klass* [Class].

Mathiasen's comic strips in *Dagbladet Arbeideren* do more or less the same thing as did the poetry published in the labour-movement press during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, namely to disseminate this movement's politics in an accessible and effective form (see Mral 1985).

One benefit of analysing comics as working-class literature is that it makes it possible to highlight their relationship to the working class and to working-class politics. Nevertheless, it also entails some risks. One of them is that it establishes a rather strong analogy between comics and literature. This risks obscuring those features of comics that set the artform apart from traditional literary genres and which cannot easily be subsumed under the notion of literature, and thus it might turn (this kind of) comics research into a sub-dicipline of or an appendix to literary studies. In order to counter this risk, it is perhaps better to introduce another concept – that of *working-class comics*, defined as a specific strand either within the tradition of working-class literature or in that of comics (or both). While signalling clearly that it is inspired by the concept of working-class literature, this concept also highlights the specificity of the artform of comics, and thus upholds the relative autonomy from more traditional disciplines that is necessary if one wants comics studies to be a field of interdisciplinary inquiry.

On the back cover of Källblads *Hundra år i samma klass*, the publisher compares it to works by two of the most well-known Swedish working-class writers of all times, the above-mentioned Moa Martinson and Ivar Lo-Johansson, and argues that Källbland's work is a graphic novel in their spirit for and about our time and age: "en tecknad arbetarskildring för och om vår tid" (Källblad 2014). The Swedish term "arbetarskildring" literally means 'depiction of workers' and is often used to describe works in the tradition of working-class literature. Thus, the formulation could be translated as "working-class literature in comic form for and about our time". In other words, Källblad's graphic novel is said to be very similar to traditional working-class literature, at the same time as its form – that fact that it is a graphic novel – is emphasized. It is this relationship to working-class literature that the concept of working-class comics is intended to capture.

Labour-Movement Comics

Even if definitions of Scandinavian working-class literature are often quite generous and flexible (especially in contemporary literary research), there are still several kinds of literature that could, theoretically, be placed in this category that have yet only received limited attention by scholars in the field. This includes literary works that could be analysed as working-class literature because of how they have been published – especially those published by labour-movement publishers or in labour-movement publications. They could be viewed as working-class literature both because of their direct, institutional, affiliation with labour-movement organisations (regardless of whether they thematize or propagate labour-movement politics) and because they are aimed at readers in the working class and the labour movement.

As has been highlighted in recent research, the labour movement, and not the least its press, has for a long time constituted a relatively autonomous public sphere in the Scandinavian countries, where different kinds of than the ones that have been successful on the bookmarket or among professional critics literature have been published and discussed (Nilsson 2021). This literature can be viewed as *labour-movement literature*, and as an important but hitherto under-researched strand of working-class literature. As has been mentioned above, there are several examples of comics that have been published in left-wing or labour-movement publications. Below, I will take a closer look at a sub-section of this category: comics in trade-union membership magazines published by unions belonging to The Swedish Trade Union Association.[6]

These magazines make up a very big, yet under-researched, part of the modern press in Sweden. For example, in the otherwise very ambitious four-volume work *Den svenska pressens historia* [The History of the Swedish Press] (2000–2003) they are not discussed at all. Thus, when literary scholar Margareta Wallander (1992) calls the Swedish trade-union press "the forgotten press" she is not exaggerating. This lack of interest is quite remarkable, and very regrettable, given the fact trade-union membership magazines have been among the most-read of all periodical publications in Sweden, especially during the decades after

[6] The Swedish Trade Union Confederation, which has strong ties to the Swedish Social-Democratic party, organises almost all working-class trade unions in Sweden. Currently is has fourteen member organisations, that together organise around 1.5 million workers.

the Second World War. For example, in 1970 the unions belonging to The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (which coistits of unions organising a majority of the country's working class) published 24 membership magazines with a combined circulation of 1.700.000 copies (Wallander 1982, 7), and today they publish 12 magazines that together reach 1.200.000 union members (Nilsson 2021, 146).

At least since the 1930s, these publications have often contained comics. However, those involved in writing the history of Swedish comics have not showed more interest in trade-union membership magazines than have the historians of the press. As an illustration of this, one could mention the comic "Koko invandrare" [Koko the immigrant] by Greek-Swedish comics artist Christos Sourlos, which was published in the trade-union membership magazine *Metallarbetaren* [The metalworker] between 1970 and 1993. During this period, *Metallarbetaren* had a very wide circulation. In fact, every issue was printed in more than 350.000 copies, and it reached more than twelve percent of the Swedish population between the ages of 12 and 75. Thus, "Koko invandrare" was without doubt one of the most widely read comics in Sweden for more than two decades. Nevertheless, it is very hard to find any information whatsoever about it. On "Seriewikin" – an on-line encyclopaedia about comics, published by Seriefrämjandet (an organisation that promotes Swedish comics) – one can find only the following information:

> **"Koko Invandrare"** var en svensk humorserie av Christos Sourlos som publicerades i *Metallarbetaren* under flera år på 1980-talet. Den handlade om en generisk manlig invandrare och de fördomar, acklimatiseringsproblem m.m. som man kan stöta på i Sverige. ("Seriewikin" 2022)
>
> (**"Koko Invandrare"** was a Swedish humorous comic by Christos Sourlos, published in *Metallarbetaren* during several years in the 1980s. It was a bout a generic male immigrant and the prejudices, difficulties to acclimatise etc that one can encounter in Sweden.)

This is rather sparse, given that "Koko invandrare" – as was mentioned above – must have been one of the most widely read comics in Sweden during a quarter of a century.

Furthermore, the statement that it was published during several years is the 1980s is not even close to being correct.[7]

It is not only in "Seriewikin" that comics published in trade-union membership magazines are not given the attention that they deserve. The situation in no better in academic comics research. In fact, there is only one research publication about comics in the trade-union press, namely Lena Johannesson's (2007) essay "Yrkesserien – en folkhemsparadox" (The profession-comic – a paradox in the welfare state).

Today, the Scandinavian labour-movements are not as powerful as they once were, and their press is not as important. Thus, it might very well be that this press is not as central as it once was for the production, dissemination, reception and discussion of comics is in Scandinavia. However, it is not hard to find examples of how the legacy of the labour-movement's publishing of comics continue to have effects still today. For example, Källblad states (in a private mail to the author of this chapter) that, as a kid, he read and liked comics – including "Koko Invandrare" – in *Metallarbetaren* (Källblad 2021). It was also in this magazine that he published his first comics:

> Metallarbetaren var den första tidning där jag blev publicerad. Det var min fars facktidning och de hade speciellt avsedda barnsidor där det någon gång kring 1981-83 uppmanades till att skicka in serier. Jag gjorde det och blev publicerad. Det kändes superhäftigt. (Källblad 2021)

> Metallarbetaren was the first publication where I was published. It was my dad's trade-union membership magazine and they had special pages for kids where, sometime around 1981–83, there was an invitation to submit comics. I did so, and was published. It felt super-awsome.

[7] This is a good illustration of a common problem in comics studies, namely that many of the resources that comics scholars use are created by fans and amateurs and are not always reliabale. However, the website Lambiek.net get the publication years right. It also mentions that Sourlos also published another comic in a trade-union memebership magazine, namely "Hans och Greta" [Hansel and Gretel] in *Industriarbetaren* [The Industy Worker]. https://www.lambiek.net/artists/s/sourlos_christos.htm

Thus, at least one prominent contemporary Swedish comics artist's career has indeed been influenced by the labour-movement press.

Furthermore, even if its golden age may be over, the labour-movement press actually continues to be an important part of the comics landscape in Sweden. For example, in recent decades, *Arbetaren* (The Worker), a journal published by the anarcho-syndicalist union Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation (The Swedish Workers' Central Organisation) has been an important platform for many of Sweden's leading comics artists, not the least female comics artists such as Sofia Olsson, Daria Bogdanska, Liv Strömqvist, Sara Granér, Hanna Petersson, and Nina Hemmingsson (Nilsson 2022b, 202; Jokkala 2022, 224). Examples of prominent male comics artists that have published works in *Arbetaren* are Henrik Bromander, Lars Sjunnesson and Mats Jonsson (Jokkala 2022, 225). The comics in *Arbetaren* are often satirical and political (Jokkala 2022, 225), and the journal is without doubt one of the most important publishers of working-class/labour-movement comics today (Nilsson 2022b, 202). This illustrates that the labour-movement press continues to be important for Scandinavian comics artists still today, and that it is therefore important that comics scholars include it in their studies.

The Profession Comic

The above-mentioned essay by Johannesson about comics in the trade-union press focuses on only one genre, namely one that she calls "yrkesserien" [the occupation comic]. According to her, this type of comic – which depicts the occupations that the unions organise – flourishes during a period beginning in the 1930s and ending in the 1960s (Johannesson 2007, 389). One of the examples that she highlights is "P. N. Selgren", which was published in *Målarnas Medlemsblad* [The Painters' Union's Membership magazine]. The title is a name derived from the Swedish word for paintbrush, and an English equivalent could perhaps be 'P. A. Intbrush'. Other examples of occupation comics are "Filberg", "Götlund" and "Stålfarfar", which were all published in the above-mentioned *Metallarbetaren*. All of them are named after their protagonists, whose names – just like that of P. N. Selgren – are related to their jobs. Stålfarfar, for example, could be translated as 'Steel-Grandpa'. Götlund, whose name contains an allusion on metal casting, was created by Birger Malmborg, who was also a modernist painter, and was published for an even longer period than "Koko

Invandrare". It first appeared in 1938 and then continued for almost half a century until 1982. "Stålfarfar", which also was published during several decades, was created by Nils Bertil Andersson (better known under his penname Ason). He also created the comic "Spik-Anton" [Nail-Anton], which was of course published in the construction workers' trade-union membership magazine *Byggnadsarbetaren* (The Construction Worker).

Johanesson notes that some of the comics that were published in the trade-union membership magazines were quite political. Her main example is "Curt säger" (Curs says), which was published in the garment workers' union's membership magazine *Beklädnadsfolket* (literally: 'The Garment People) and *Lantarbetaren* (The agricultural worker) in the 1970s. It was commissioned by A-pressen – a group of social-democratic newspapers owned by The Social-Democratic Party and The Swedish Trade Union Confederation – as propaganda for the Employee Funds that the Swedish labour movement tried to establish during this period. It depicted, in a highly satirical way, Curt Nicolin, who was the president of the Swedish Employers Association. According to Johannesson (2007, 398) this comic is best described as "klasskampspropaganda" [class-struggle propaganda].

However, Johannesson highligts that "Curt säger" is an exception, and that most of the occupation comics were not very political, at least not explicitly. This, she argues, is the result of the triumph of the medium of comics over the labour-movement's political agenda (Johannesson 2007, 392–396). The occupation comics, she also claims, constitute a counter-image to, or even a sabotage of, "den långt drivna heroiseringen av arbetaren inom arbetarrörelsen" (the radical heroization of workers within the labour movement) (Johannesson 2007, 391).

This analysis is problematic in several ways. One possible objection concerns the claim about the radical heroization of workers in the labour-movement. I have spent many hours in archives, going through trade-union membership magazines without finding more than occasional examples – for example in poems published in connection with elections or major strikes – of anything that could be called worker heroization. Thus, Johannesson's claim seems to be exaggerated, to say the least. Another objection concerns the idea about the artform of comics being incompatible with labour-movement politics. Such media

determinism ignores the facts that comics is a heterogenous medium that can be, and has been, used in many different ways, and that there are numerous examples of comics having been used to promote labour-movement politics. Johannesson herself mentions “Curt säger”, and above I have given several other examples.

Furthermore, it is not impossible that even the seemingly apolitical and humorous occupation comics might have fulfilled political functions, at least implicitly. During the inter-war era, many Swedish trade-union membership magazines set as their goal to broaden their audiences. Instead of appealing mainly to functionaries within the organizations, as had been the case earlier, they wanted to reach out to all union members, as well as to their families (Wallander 1992, 105). This was one of the reasons behind the re-makes during this period of several magazines, the first of which was *Metallarbetaren*, which underwent a radical modernization in 1937 (Wallander 1992, 109). *Kommunalarbetaren* (The Municipal Worker) followed suit in December 1938/January 1939 (Nyhlén 1970, 18; Wallander 1992, 143). Now, this magazine was also sent out to the members by mail – earlier they had had to pick it up at the local union office – which probably had as a result that more members actually received and read it (Lindblad 1960, 421). One important feature of the attempts to appeal to a broader audience was that literature was given a more prominent role in the trade-union memebership magazines. In *Kommunalarbetaren*, for example, book reviews were introduced in the 1930s, and the publication of both poetry and short stories increased (Nyhlén 1970, 18). The publication of comics in trade-union membership magazines might very well have been motivated by this ambition to reach out to more readers. And this may indeed have has political effects. First of all, if comics attract readers to trade-union membership magazines, it is not impossible that at least some of them will also read other texts in these publications, such as editorials and political commentaries. Secondly, comics set in working-class milieus with worker protagonists can, even if they are not explicitly political, contribute to the creation and dissemination of a social imaginary where occupation, and thereby, at least implicitly, class, is central. And thereby they might contribute to the creation of working-class class consciousness.

Historically, the profession comic has been a dominant genre in the trade-union membership magazines in Sweden. However, as has already been mentioned, other genres were also

published. One interesting example is “Mysteriet M” (The Mystery M) by Magnus Knutsson and Jan Åke Winqvist, which was published in *Metallarbetaren* during the early 1980s and can be described as an adventure comic in work-shop milieu. Another example is Charlie Christensen’s satirical comic “Arne Anka” (Arne Duck). It ran in *Metallarbetren* from the mid 1980s to the mid-1990s, and then again from 2004.

Today, comics of different kinds are published in trade-union membership magazines. Some of them have quite a lot in common with the older profession comics. For example, Källblad’s “På väg” (On the road), which is published in *Transportarbetaren* [The Transport Worker] is a humour comic featuring transport workers. Others are more political. As an example of this one can mention that Mats Jonsson publishes a political commentary in comic form in every issue of *Arbetet* [Labour], a magazine published by The Swedish Trade Union Confederation.

An Important Piece of the Puzzle

In this chapter, I have tried to demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of working-class comics in the analysis of Scandinavian comics. The most obvious aspect of this usefulness is that the concept helps make visible divisions within the artform of comics that are related to the social and political class divisions in the societies in which comics are produced, circulated, read, and discussed. However, the concept also helps us become aware of a substantial body of comics – for example those that have been produced, disseminated, read, and discussed within the labour movement – that are not always included neither in historically oriented comics research, nor in theoretically oriented discussions about things such as the forms and functions of comics, which of course are conditioned by the “archive” of comics available to those doing comics research.

In Scandinavian research about working-class literature, the focus has been mainly on books in the sphere of literature, while labour-movement literature – for example poems and short stories published in trade-union membership magazines – have often been neglected. One reason for this has been that working-class literature has enjoyed a higher status in the Scandinavian countries than in most other parts of the (Western/capitalist) world. The perhaps best symbol for this is that in 1974, working-class writers Harry Martinson and

Eyvind Johnson were awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature as representatives for "the many proletarian writers or working-class poets who, on a wide front, broke into our literature", as Karl Ragnar Gierow (1974) of the Swedish Academy put it in his award ceremony speech. Because of working-class literature's relatively high status, and the visibility in the sphere of literature that comes with it, literary scholars have not needed to go beyond a traditional and hegemonic understanding of literature in their search for texts to analyse. The resulting negligence of labour-movement literature is highly problematic, not the least given the fact the labour movement has been particularly strong in the Scandinavian countries, and the literary life within Scandinavian labour-movement organisations has been very extensive. One of the aims of the highlighting in this chapter of labour-movement comics such as the occupation comics published in trade-union membership magazines is to warn scholars within the field of comics studies against making the same mistake as many scholars within literary studies have done. Much comics research in Scandinavia focuses on genres and media such as commercial comic books, graphic novels, comic strips published in newspapers etc. However, there are also researchers that venture into other domains, such as fanzines and feminist journals. This is extremely valuable, since it helps broadening our understanding of what comics have been, are, and can be. Scholarly interest in working-class and labour-movement comics will contribute to this endeavour.

Nevertheless, the expansion of our understanding of comics through the inclusion of new material also necessitates a theorization of how different spheres for the production, dissemination, reception, and discussion of comics relate to each other. In research about labour-movement literature, this literature has often been conceptualized – mainly with the point of departure in the theoretical concept of the counter public sphere – as having relative autonomy from the (bourgeois) literary sphere (see e.g. Nilsson 2006, 36; Mral 1985). However, the relationships between different literary spheres vary, both between national contexts and over time, and must always be determined with the point of departure in concrete analyses of historically and geographically specific cases.

In today's Sweden, labour-movement comics seems to enjoy a relatively low degree of autonomy. Many comics that are first published in labour-movement periodicals are later re-published by commercial publishers, or in periodicals with no ties to this movement. One

good example of this is Christensen's "Arne Anka". It has not only been published in the trade-union press, but also in album form, and it has also been adapted for the theatre stage. Other examples include Sundvall's "Voijägarna", which was first serialised in the anarcho-syndicalist paper *Arbetaren*, and thereafter published in book form by Galago, and Peterson's "Pigan", which was also first serialized in *Arbetaren*, and then published both in the literary journal *Världens ende* and on Peterson's webpage (it has also been re-mediated as a feminist musical). There are also examples of comics that first appear elsewhere and are then re-published in labour-movement periodicals. One such example is Bogdanska's *Wage Slaves*, which was first published as a graphic novel (published by Galago) and then serialized in *Arbetaren*.

Earlier, however, labour-movement comics seem to have had more autonomy from other parts of society. The occupation comics published in trade-union membership magazines during the twentieth century, for example, did not receive much attention outside of the labour movement. But this does not mean that labour-movement comics were totally cut off from other spheres where comics were produced, disseminated, read and discussed. On the contrary, many of the artists behind the occupation comics were also active outside of this movement. As an example, one can mention that Ason not only created occupation comics such as "Stålfarfar" and "Spik-Anton" but also some twenty different comics that were published in commercial newspapers and magazines. It is also possible that the very fact that comics were published in the labour-movement press has had effects on Swedish comics in general, for example by expanding the market for comics, and thereby making it possible for more comics artist to make a living from their art.

Concluding remarks

This chapter has argued that the application of the concept of working-class comics is valuable in the study of Scandinavian comics. One of its main advantages is that it helps making visible the existence of comics that are otherwise easily overlooked. Labour-movement comics are a good example of this. They have been an important phenomenon in Scandinavia, and thus they deserve attention from comics researchers.

Working-class comics and other kinds of working-class comics often display different features than other comics. They may represent other people and other experiences, and they are often published for other reasons, than most commercial comic books or graphic novels with aesthetic or artistic ambitions. Thus, research about working-class comics does not only represent an expansion of comics research's object of study – it also transforms this object through the inclusion of new kinds and uses of comics.

The concept of working-class comics is closely connected to that of working-class literature and, thus, to literary studies. It is important to be aware of this, since comics cannot be reduced to a literary genre, and since comic studies should not be thought of as a sub-discipline within literary studies. However, too much distance to literature and literary studies will not benefit comics studies. As has been emphasized by many commentators, comics are, among other things, a kind of literature – "une literature dessinée", as Harry Morgan (2003, 19) puts it. In the case of Swedish working-class comics, this argument finds support in the many connections to working-class literature that can be found both in the works, in texts about them (such as album covers), and in the facts that several comics artists view themselves in analogy with working-class writers. Ignoring this would be to obscure important aspects of the history of comics, at least in a Scandinavian context.

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