

Swedish folkbildning and democracy

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Introduction

This paper aims at presenting the concept of 'folkbildning' and the organisations in question; the study associations and the folk high schools. Special focus is put on the relation between folkbildning organisations versus the state and the role of the National Council of Adult Education, Folkbildningsrådet. The conceptual foundation of Swedish folkbildning and some of its characteristics is presented.

The last part of the paper introduces a discussion on how the overall objective of folkbildning - to develop democracy - can be interpreted. This is done from a policy perspective, i.e. the text focuses on the role that the folk high schools and study associations have expressed they want to play in the years to come promoting democracy.

1. Folkbildning in Sweden

Every year, several million Swedes gather to participate in Swedish liberal adult education, folkbildning. Writing courses, choir music, languages, environmental issues... study circles and folk high school courses are available in hundreds of different subjects. People want to learn and grow, not just in childhood and adolescence, but throughout life. Swedish folkbildning meets this need - and thereby contributes to quality of life, societal development and growth. But folkbildning also has an intrinsic value because knowledgeable and active citizens constitute the core of a democratic society.

In Sweden's study associations and folk high schools, people meet to discuss and learn together. Life-long, life-spanning and life-enriching learning means that people seek knowledge, continuity and insight throughout life. Peoples' reasons for seeking knowledge and fellowship

through folkbildning vary. All of these reasons are meaningful, regardless of whether it is a question of personal development, finding a new job, or simply a desire to learn.

Folkbildning exists for everyone in society, but should primarily reach out to adults with little formal education. Its open climate of discussion, respect for different mindsets and democratic approach lower the thresholds to joining folkbildning's activities. Here, everyone participates on equal terms, but based on different backgrounds.

Study associations and folk high schools provide a rich offering of courses and educational programmes - everything from study circles where a small group meets a few times in their leisure time, up to multi-year, full-time courses of study at folk high schools. Folkbildning is also Sweden's largest organiser of cultural events, with thousands of concerts, lectures and public debates - nationwide.

1.1 Study associations

There are currently nine study associations to which the National Council of Adult Education distributes folkbildning grants. In total, the study associations have more than 300 member or cooperating organisations at the national level. Every study association has its own more or less pronounced profile depending on the popular movements and other organisations that are members of the respective association.

The study circle is the most characteristic form of activity for the study associations. In the study circle, a small group of people gather to learn together; the average number of participants per study circle is seven. Study circles are conducted in the most varied subjects depending on the participants' desires etc. Each year, approximately 280,000 study circles are arranged throughout the country, with approximately one million Swedes participating (Sweden has 9 million inhabitants). Some of these persons take part in more than one study

circle which increases the participation figure to close to two million. The aesthetic subject area, especially music, theatre and dance is dominant, with approximately 60 per cent of circle activities, as counted in study hours. Almost two thirds of the participants are women.

About two thirds of the study circle participants have 3 year upper secondary education or less. About one third have education above upper secondary level. This pattern reflects well the educational background of the population as a whole.

Cultural programmes of various kinds comprise the other major branch of activities for the study associations. Approximately 300,000 programmes are arranged every year, with close to 16 million visitors/participants. Lectures are the most popular form of cultural programme.

Study association activities are conducted in all of Sweden's 290 municipalities. Together, the study associations have 370 sections that carry out the external activities with study circles, cultural programmes and other group activities - in part for the public, and in part for the members of the respective study association's member organisations.

Beyond the government subsidy financed activities, the study associations also provide training on assignment, e g by municipalities and labour market authorities.

1.2 Folk high schools

There are currently 150 folk high schools throughout Sweden. The first folk high school started already in 1868. The folk high school is a form of study for adults, with a minimum age of 18 years. The schools normally provide priority to applicants with little prior education. The freedom of the folk high schools to formulate their courses based on the school's special emphasis and profile provides

considerable opportunities for the course participants to influence the focus and content of the studies based on prior knowledge, interests and needs. It is characteristic of the education at folk high schools that one often works with thematic studies and project work. Here, the participants' experience from work and social life is a major asset to the work.

The folk high schools have courses on various levels with various emphases. The long-term courses last from 1 - 3 years and have some 29,000 students each term. All tuition is free of charge and national student aid is available.

General courses that can qualify for university studies are an important part of the activities and are offered at all folk high schools. The folk high schools have approximately 13,000 participants in general courses every term. Less than 3 year upper secondary education is the educational background of more than 80 per cent of these students. Almost half of the long courses at folk high schools are general courses, aiming at people with shorter previous education.

The folk high schools also offer many special courses, such as those in music, media, craftsmanship, theatre, languages, preventative healthcare and tourism, where a large part of study time is devoted to the selected subject area. Some of these courses are vocational. Examples include training to become a youth recreation leader, drama pedagogue, journalist, cantor or treatment assistant. There are about 16,000 students in the special courses every term. More than two thirds of these students have 3 year upper secondary previous education or higher.

The folk high schools also have approximately 80,000 participants per term in short courses of various kinds.

2. Public support to folkbildning

A fundamental reason for public support of folkbildning is that it contributes to democratic development in society. Conditions for the government grant to folk high schools and study associations are set forth in the Decree on Government Subsidies to Folkbildning (1991:977), last revised in 2007.

In 2006 a unanimous Swedish Parliament (Riksdag) decided on a new bill concerning Folkbildning and increased the state funding by 13%. The state grant to folkbildning is at present 440 million USD, which is shared fairly equally between folk high schools on the one hand and study associations on the other. The budget for Folkbildningsrådet, National Council of Adult Education is 3,3 million USD.

The state confirmed the aims of the government subsidy and added a number of areas where folkbildning activity especially motivated support by the state.

2.1 The aims of the government subsidy

The government subsidies to folkbildning shall according to the Decree aim to:

1. support activities that contribute to strengthening and developing democracy,
2. contribute to making it possible for people to influence their life situation and create participative involvement in societal development,
3. contribute to levelling educational gaps and raising the level of education and cultural awareness in society, and
4. contribute to broadening the interest for and increase participation in cultural life.

Activities in the following areas constitute motives for government support to a particularly high degree:

1. the common set of fundamental values; the equal value of all people and equality between the sexes,
2. the challenges of a multicultural society,
3. the demographic challenge,
4. life-long learning,
5. culture,
6. access and opportunities for the disabled, and
7. public health, sustainable development and global justice.

2.2 The National Council of Adult Education, Folkbildningsrådet

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education, established in 1991, is a non-profit association with certain authoritative tasks delegated by the government and the Swedish Parliament (Riksdag). The decree states that the National Council of Adult Education shall determine who will be granted subsidies in accordance with the decree. The Council distributes government grants to study associations and folk high schools. Every year, the National Council of Adult Education shall submit an annual report and budgetary documentation to the government. The Council shall continuously follow up and evaluate the activities in relation to the objectives stated and the terms stipulated for payment of government subsidies.

The Council shall submit to the government such factual information regarding the activities and such financial statements as needed for follow-up and evaluation, in accordance with the regulations and instructions issued by the government.

The Swedish National Council of Adult Education may decide to demand repayment of a government subsidy in part or in whole.

Government subsidies may not be used for activities with a

commercial purpose.

Subsidies to study associations and folk high schools are also provided by most municipalities, county councils and regions. They are free to decide on this matter based upon the principle of local self-government.

The Council also works with certain assignments from its members. The National Council of Adult Education has three members: The Swedish National Federation of Study Associations, the Interest Organisation for Popular Movement Folk High Schools (RIO) and the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions (SKL)..

The organisation of the National Council of Adult Education is the following:

The Representative Body, the highest decision making body, which meets twice annually. This body decides on the budget of the Council.

The Council Board, which is appointed by the member organisations for two years at a time. The members elect the chairman of the Council Board. The present chairman is Mr Torsten Friberg.

The Office of the National Council of Adult Education. The office is located in Stockholm, at which some twenty five people are employed and where the Secretary General, Mrs Britten Månsson-Wallin, is in charge.

3. Folkbildning's conceptual foundation

Folkbildning's conceptual heritage stretches back more than a century. Folkbildning grew forth in a Sweden where the level of education was low and large groups of the population were excluded from higher education. Folkbildning became the answer to people's longing for knowledge and desire to influence societal development.

The development of Swedish democracy is closely related to folkbildning activities in popular movements. Still today, a central concept is everyone's right to knowledge and development. A society with small educational divides is a central goal of folkbildning.

Study associations and folk high schools have always been a part of the non-formal educational system. Swedish folkbildning offers an alternative educational pathway in relation to the formal system (municipal adult education, university courses etc.)

The government provides financial support, but folkbildning's organisations are free to shape their own activities based on overall objectives. This freedom is of central importance to understanding the role of folkbildning in Swedish society. Freedom from governmental control and the strong ties to the non-profit sector make folkbildning a force for societal change.

The common concepts of folkbildning are noticeable not least in its practical activities in a dynamic interaction with the participants. Folkbildning has the following characteristics:

- *Knowledge and education are valuable in themselves*

In folkbildning activities, learning is related to the person's overall life situation. This holistic view of people and knowledge stands in contrast to a purely instrumental view of knowledge, where knowledge is mediated and acquired based on a given purpose. The concept of "bildning", or formative education, is complex and ties into an approach where the knowledge people acquire leads to personal growth. From this perspective, formative or "bildande" knowledge can be described as a process - a journey where people develop in stride with new experiences.

- *People freely and voluntarily take part in a learning process that includes collaboration, discussion and*

reflection

In folkbildning, people participate of their own free will in learning processes that often include social interaction with other people. In the small group, opinions and values can interact with each other. Dialogue and cooperation is emphasized and seen as a way of providing the knowledge with additional dimensions. To reflect and discover interrelations is meaningful, as is strengthening self-esteem and seeing opportunities of taking new steps in life.

- *The participant has a great deal of influence on the activities*

In folkbildning, the participant is an active co-creator in the learning process. This in itself embraces an open and non-dogmatic view of the activities. Participant influence means more than an opportunity to influence the focus and structure of the studies, however. In its extension it means a faith in people's ability to actively assume responsibility for the activities in which they participate.

- *A strong tie to civil society*

Folkbildning contributes to strengthening civil society through close co-operation with volunteer organisations, associations and various types of networks. Folkbildning is strongly rooted in Swedish popular movements and association activities. This fact greatly affects the concrete activities in folk high schools and study associations. Flexibility and volunteer involvement are characteristic as is willingness to conduct continuous dialogue with civil society's multiplicity of organisations and groups - established popular movements, local associations and networks.

Folkbildning's ideological foundation can of course be described based on dimensions other than these. Sometimes its informal

character is emphasized, for example in the lack of curricula and marks. A view of knowledge that values practical and theoretical skills equally is also usually pointed out, as is the ability to act flexibly and with unconventional methods to meet new needs in society.

The basis of folkbildning's conceptual foundation is a strong defense of the equal value of people regardless of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and educational background. This should also be reflected in the practical activities.

Will folkbildning's conceptual foundation, as has outlined here, be changed in the future? It is clear that folkbildning activities are born from a tension between tradition and renewal, where a conceptual heritage meets a present day in continual change. In such a way, the conceptual foundation is said to be a kind of inner-compass that points out the direction, rather than a detailed map that always shows the way.

4. An overall objective - to develop democracy

Looking to the future, renewing, developing and reinforcing democracy stand out as a central and immediate objective for folk high schools and study associations. Folkbildning's future strength will also largely be decided by its ability to interpret this role at all times and concretely act to contribute to strengthening the democratic dialogue in society, not least in popular movements. Through folkbildning people can acquire tools so that they can participate and strengthen the democratic society with self-esteem.

The last few years' democracy debate has been extensive. It is said that democracy is threatened or at least showing serious flaws. In the debate, it is also pointed out that there exists a rift in trust between the people and their elected representatives - between a political and financial elite and citizens who feel themselves ever more marginalized

and powerless.

At the same time, the citizens' social commitment is considerable, particularly among the young. In an international comparison, participation in elections is still high. The number of youth organisations is growing. A large part of the population is still active in popular movements and other volunteer organisations. Accordingly, the overall picture is not entirely clear. But democracy is no static condition that is achieved once and for all. The insight of flaws and imperfections in democracy's ability to be an effective tool for people to jointly decide on public affairs is a challenge.

4.1 Central objectives in folkbildning's democratic work

It is said that democracy must be won by every new generation. This is no exaggeration. In every age, efforts to create fertile ground for democratic growth are required. This consists, among other things, of every individual being able to acquire the ability to listen and understand, take arguments into consideration and present an argument, and to have the ability to compromise and accept differences.

In a culturally diverse society it is becoming ever more important to be able to understand that the fundamental values and the systems of norms that we acquired in childhood are not the only ones, but are rather constantly tested in the meeting with the new.

A democratic culture is created in folkbildning. Ways of working, methodology and pedagogy constitute good soil for the development of independent and critically scrutinizing individuals. New knowledge arises in the meeting of people, and their unique experiences and perspectives. Here the ability to put democracy into practice is also developed.

However, Swedish folkbildning cannot be reduced to just an instrument or a means in democratic efforts. In reality folkbildning's

organisations are a part of the Swedish democracy. This role can best be fulfilled if folkbildning continues to have an independent position in relation to the state, the municipalities and the market, and through its own aggressive and concrete democratic efforts, driven by an internal conviction under its own power.

4.1.1 A clear voice for democracy

Democracy is a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden's history and from an international perspective far from self-evident. A large part of the world's population lacks the democratic rights and freedoms that Swedish citizens take for granted.

Folkbildning's organisations and representatives bear a great responsibility when it comes to standing up for fundamental democratic values and human rights in Sweden and the world.

The threats to the open and democratic society express themselves in different ways. They can be based in ethnic, religious, gender-related and political contrasts. Every age demands the ability to recognize and analyse these threats, as well as the courage to consistently combat the forces that challenge the open, democratic society and its citizens. Here folkbildning contributes as one actor among many to maintaining a stable defense of democracy.

4.1.2 Folkbildning for active citizenship

A living democracy presupposes knowledgeable, educated and active citizens, with the ability to work together with others. In a democratic society, people's drive to learn more, develop their inherent abilities and seek new insights is encouraged and supported. Folk high schools and study associations are of great importance in this, with their high annual participation rates. Folkbildning's task is obvious and unique - it is and shall be civically formative.

The activities in study associations and folk high schools shall in

their full scope clearly support the civically formative elements. These elements are hardly prominent within other forms of adult education, where there instead exists a focus on a more economical perspective, to view education, and adult education in particular, as primarily individual projects. In these projects, people are expected to continuously develop their expertise over their lifetimes, often with a more or less clearly stated ambition to satisfy the labour market's needs.

In contrast to this approach, folkbildning wants to emphasize the civically formative aspects. This means that the participants' personal development in study circles and folk high school courses is related to their ability to work as active and involved members of society together with others.

These two perspectives need not stand in contrast to each other and in reality they seldom exist in their pure forms. Just as there are civically formative elements in public schools, there is goal oriented knowledge building within folkbildning. It is a matter of striving to bring about fruitful dynamics in the practical learning process, where folkbildning's pedagogy, with its civically formative elements, meets the participant's need for individual proficiency development and personal growth.

How then will the civically formative dimensions in future folkbildning take shape? What role can and will folkbildning play in these contexts? We want to emphasize some of many areas where folkbildning can contribute to a development of Swedish democracy.

The future's educational activities are:

- *Cross-border*

In the future, democracy will not only be a national issue, but rather increasingly more of a global matter. Future civic education must have

its basis in this fact. Insight into the democratic decision-making processes locally, regionally, nationally and globally is required for people to be able to assert their opinions and rights. It is about the citizens being able to understand and influence different decision-making levels and institutions, from the municipal to the European level. Just as important are the opportunities to get involved in the volunteer, non-profit organisations that work across national frontiers.

- *Communicative*

Modern information technology will probably become an increasingly prominent democratic tool. Here opportunities of increased citizen influence will be opened, provided that everyone has access to the technology and knowledge of how it can be used. Communication between people is however far more than a question of technology. Disabilities of different kinds must sometimes be conquered. In an ever more multi-ethnic society where many, even native Swedes, have linguistic difficulties, great efforts are required so that everyone will be able to participate in a democratic process.

- *Reflective*

Finding information will hardly be a problem in the future. The difficulty lies rather in choosing from and critically scrutinizing the information flow to which everyone is exposed. In addition to this, traditional norms and values will be challenged and change. Here, folkbildning's ability to offer people time and space for dialogue, consideration and reflection is of central importance. Folk high schools and study associations shall meet people's needs for overview and perspective in a society that, for many, seems more fragmented and difficult to grasp.

- *Close to daily life*

The future's educational activities tie into people's daily lives and are based on the possibilities of influencing the local surroundings. Folkbildning shall be a driving force in the local development and democratic efforts, where the local community and the neighbourhood are often the base. Here there is great potential for development and renewal of Swedish democracy - a civic power shaped from the bottom up. Folk high schools and study associations have, with their local roots and their developed contacts in civil society, great possibilities to contribute to such a development.

- *Offer equal opportunity*

A folkbildning with civically formative elements shall contribute to increased equality in society so that men and women can participate in forming the society of the future on equal terms. Structural inequality shall be identified and combated, not just in theory, but also in practical activities with participants as well as folkbildning's own organisations. In future democratic debate, issues of identity, gender and human relations will gain greater importance. Folkbildning can constitute an important arena for these discussions.

4.1.3 Room for democracy

Folk high schools and study associations shall be attractive meeting places, open to everyone.

At courses and in study circles, regardless of subject, both global and local social issues that are important to people in daily life are discussed: social services, schools, healthcare, equality, cultural experiences etc. Sometimes charged discussions of an ideological

character arise. This is in itself a democratic process.

Folkbildning's organisations must continually seek meeting places that are sufficiently attractive. They should take initiatives to new democratic arenas - physical and virtual, temporary and long-term.

Folkbildning's meeting places shall be close at hand, open to all and perceived as appropriate.

4.1.4 A part of civil society

The popular movements are often described as an indispensable part of Swedish democracy. Folkbildning's organisations have traditionally close ties to Swedish popular movements. Particularly in the collaboration between study associations and their member organisations and folk high schools and their principals, which are often popular movements, a strong alliance for the renewal and defense of Swedish democracy is formed. The publicly owned folk high schools have also cultivated collaboration with civil society.

The concept of civil society is sometimes used to identify that part of the society, separate from the state, the market and the individual households, where people voluntarily organise themselves with others. This includes popular movements, associations, clubs, networks and other groups.

The importance of civil society has been called into focus in the last few years, often in connection with issues of social capital and social trust. Studies have shown that a richly diverse association and club life, cultural life and various kinds of networks increase trust

and stability in the society, at the same time as the democratic base is strengthened.

When the Swedish term folkbildning is used in this text, it refers to the folk high schools and the study associations, i. e. the organisations that constitute the liberal non-formal and voluntary educational system in Sweden. The term 'folkbildning' is difficult to translate into English. It is sometimes translated as liberal or popular adult education. However the specific conceptual foundation of 'folkbildning' extends beyond the term 'adult education', which is why 'folkbildning' is used in this text as-is.

<국문 요약>

스웨덴의 Folkbildning와 민주주의

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스웨덴에는 역사적으로 오랫동안 folkbildning라고 하는 시민들의 자발적 공부모임이 발전되어 왔다. Folkbildning는 스터디단체와 시민학교로 구분할 수 있는데, 이들은 평생교육의 일종으로 시민들이 자발적으로 조직하고 운영한다는 특징이 있다. 또한 수동적으로 교육을 받기보다 스스로 학습내용을 개발하고 공부를 해나간다는 특징을 가지고 있다. 이러한 스터디단체는 매년 28만개의 단체가 만들어지며 백만명의 시민들이 참여하고 있다. 언어공부에서부터 다양한 취미활동, 환경, 기후변화 등 중요한 이슈들에 대해 공부하고 토론하는 것이다. 시민학교는 1868년에 시작되어 전국적으로 150여개가 운영되고 있다. 두 종류의 단체 모두 정부의 지원을 받고 있다. Folkbildning는 민주주의 교육을 지향하는 학습기관으로 구체적인 교육목표는 1) 민주주의를 위한 목소리 내기, 2) 적극적 시민의식 고취, 3) 민주주의를 위한 장을 제공하며, 4) 시민사회의 한 부분으로 시민사회와 밀접한 관계를 맺는 것이다.

Key words: Swedish folkbildning, democracy, active citizenship, civil society

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