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Introduction

Abstract: The present volume offers a brief but comprehensive overview of the history of sociology in Sweden. After recounting its pre-war background, the book ranges from sociology’s establishment in the Swedish university system in the 1940s and 1950s, over the critical 1960s, through the crises of the 1970s and 1980s to the challenges posed by transformations in Swedish society and university organization in the 1990s and 2000s. The authors focus on scientific boundaries, gender and the relationship between sociology and the Swedish welfare state.

Keywords: boundaries; gender; Swedish welfare state; periodization

This volume presents a brief history of the discipline of sociology in Sweden. The establishment of Swedish sociology is largely a postwar phenomenon, although previous attempts and predecessors worth mention certainly exist. Since the establishment of university departments and professorships in the late 1940s – a crucial period in terms of its academic validization – sociology has undergone an evolution often accompanied by expansion. However, periods of growth in quantity of research as well as number of students and teaching positions have alternated with periods of stagnation and quantitative decline. The late 1960s, for example, witnessed enormous growth after which the slowdown of the 1970s and 1980s was conceptualized as a severe crisis. Developments in recent decades have been variously linked to new ideals of university management, the partial dismantling of the welfare state and globalization.

Various attempts have been made to outline the development of sociology in Sweden by means of periodization. An early example came about in the effort to create a distinct profile for the discipline in the 1940s. The actors who succeeded in establishing sociology as an academic discipline in the late 1940s constructed a “modern” sociology based on the scientific ideal and a perception of empirical research as synonymous with quantitative methodology, thus setting a distinct boundary against what was previously defined as “theoretical, speculative” sociology (SOU, 1946; cf. Larsson & Wisselgren, 2006).

In the late 1980s, Katrin Fridjónsdóttir (1987) identified three key periods in the development of academic sociology: disciplinary formation in the 1940s and 1950s; consolidation and expansion in the 1950s and 1960s; and reorientation in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Another mode of outlining its development is by noting the particular theoretical orientations that dominated sociology in successive periods. Göran Ahrne (2007) pointed out that the evolution of sociology could be divided into three distinct periods based on its view of the relationship between society and the individual. During the first period, which ranged from the 1950s to mid-1960s, the dominating view was that individuals should adapt to the society. The development of Swedish society was taken for granted, and the overriding issue explored by sociologists was the individual's adjustment to aspects of modernity such as industrialization and urbanization. During the second period, which lasted from the mid-1960s to mid-1980s, the opposite was the case: how should society adapt to the individual? How should the workplace, housing and

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neighborhoods be organized so as to enhance quality of life? The third period began in the mid-1980s, when the manner in which individuals adapted themselves to other individuals dominated. In other words, relationships between individuals – men and women, ethnic groups as well as “insiders” and “outsiders” rather than individuals and institutions – were the focus of concern.

Hedvig Ekerwald (2014a) proposed periodization based on two revolutions in sociology, both relating to theoretical orientation. One took place in the wake of the upheavals of 1968, which facilitated the incursion of qualitative methods earlier than other social sciences. The other occurred at the turn of the millennium when, influenced by the international boom in social constructionism, sociology’s gaze turned away from material to ideational aspects, thus opening up to intersectionality and poststructuralism. Simultaneously, a stable core has been maintained since 1947 – evaluation research, which though affected by the above-mentioned revolutions, has changed little over time. This key aspect is mainly oriented toward the study of labor, education and the health sector. Hence, the development of sociology is characterized by an uneven but intertwined configuration of continuity and change.

Periodization may provide a general idea about how sociology evolved over time and space, but it is bound to lead to simplification (Ahrne, 1997). In practice, evolution is seldom clearly discernible. Different, competing perspectives, change and continuity, may peacefully coexist with little or no knowledge of one another. With this in mind, the present volume will embark from the pre-war background and then range over academic establishment in the Swedish university system in the 1940s and 1950s, over the radical critique and crises of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to the new challenges posed by Swedish and global society in the 1990s and 2000s. These events – academic establishment, crisis/reorientation and the recent restructuring – are presented as the three major shifts in the history of Swedish sociology.

A compressed history like this can only follow a few lines of thought and provide a small number of examples. We have chosen three perspectives as guiding principles. The first is scientific boundaries and their making, which opens a discussion on the focus and preferred orientation of sociology, and on the conflicts and tensions within the discipline. Boundary making, or “boundary work”, has proven essential to the formation of the disciplinary landscape of the natural and social sciences (Gieryn, 1983; Gieryn, 1999). Focus on boundaries is useful
since, as Lamont and Molnár (2002: 181) conclude, they “are conditions not only for separation and exclusion but also for communication, exchange, bridging, and inclusion”. In order to highlight the specificities of the Swedish development, we have looked for expressions of boundary making at work and analyzed how they were formed, maintained and transformed, when they appeared and the outcomes they effected. Both interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary boundaries are taken into account.

A second perspective focuses on the issue of gender. In general (Smith, 1987, 1990) and many other national contexts (Yeo, 1996), existing literature presents a history of sociology by focusing on male sociologists (as professors and/or agents of institutionalization), failing to pay any significant attention to the impact of gender on its development and structure (Magdalenić, 2004). We draw attention to the conditions that men and women respectively worked under, how it affected their careers and how it changed over time. Gender is explored in relation to inter- and intradisciplinary boundary making as well as to the gender equity policy of the Swedish welfare state.

The third perspective concentrates on the interconnection between the Swedish welfare state and the social sciences and scientists, a relationship that has been characterized by interdependence and mutual trust for most of the 20th century. It has been noted that this kind of social context not only shaped the disciplinary representatives’ understanding of themselves through the direct reception and application of research results, but also influenced the discipline “in terms of delimiting the very domain of research and in defining what counts and what does not count as an acceptable solution to the research problems within that domain” (Fridjónsdóttir, 1991: 248). This relationship is discussed both in general terms and in relation to its specific implications for gender and boundary issues.

By appraising the history of Swedish sociology from this trio of perspectives, the resulting analysis has the potential of not only providing an overview of past events but also shedding new light on previously overlooked dimensions. A further ambition of ours is to reveal the contested nature of historiography itself, since the history of sociology in Sweden can be, and has been, understood and described in many different ways.

The book is partially based on previous overviews of the history of Swedish sociology (including Gullberg, 1972; Fridjónsdóttir, 1987, 1991;
Allardt et al., 1988). We also draw on existing research on the development of sociology (Boalt et al., 1976; Ekerwald, 2000; Wisselgren, 2000, 2013), including our own work (Larsson, 2001; Larsson & Wisselgren, 2006; Larsson, 2008; Larsson & Suolinna, 2009; Magdalenić, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008). Primary sources include official government reports, material from university archives and the archives of the Swedish Sociological Association, peer review evaluations of sociology as a discipline, autobiographical accounts written by sociologists (Croner, 1966; Fridjónsdóttir, 1987; Widerberg, 1995; Bengtsson & Molander, 1998; Andersson, Brante & Edling, 2014), interviews with sociologists, and notes from conferences and meetings. Quotations from primary and secondary sources in Swedish have been translated by us if not otherwise indicated. Although we have adopted a restrictive style, reference to previous research is provided throughout.

Our own particular research interests are to some extent reflected in the history we have compiled. The earliest part of the story (Chapters 2, 3 and 4, written mainly by Larsson) tends to focus on the ideas and rhetoric that guided the formation of the discipline of sociology in Sweden. The latter half of the book (Chapters 5, 6 and 7, written mainly by Magdalenić) concerns the period after an academic and institutional structure was set in place, and focuses more on how the ideas and rhetoric of sociology were implemented as institutional and organizational practices and how they evolved over time. However, we hope that this brief overview will give the reader a glimpse of some of the characteristics of the history of the discipline of sociology in Sweden.
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