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The Humanities and Social Sciences in Sweden: Predicaments and Incentives for Cross-Disciplinary Research

While the challenges faced by the social sciences and humanities on a global level are similar – with regard to finding a method and theory for the adequate analysis of contemporary society, as well as the re-affirmation of values traditionally associated with the humanities – the case of Sweden is specific in a number of ways. The paper considers the way of organizing and place within Swedish society and academia occupied by studies within the social sciences and humanities.

Key words: Sweden, social sciences and humanities, funding, universities and institutes.

Challenges

In a recent article, the rector of Stockholm University argued that the Swedish government, which at present is completing its plan for a new research policy, must not forget the role of the humanities and social sciences (Bremer et al. 2012). They are indispensable for the development of a democratic and prosperous society. When listing a number of areas where research of this kind would be useful, it is symptomatic that he dwells on the utilitarian value of social research and scholarship in the humanities. While it is true that this particular form of human activity is, indeed, necessary, it is perhaps not wholly convincing to argue that it would directly affect economic development, environmental problems, or the resolution of international conflicts.

In general, the humanities and social sciences are faced with the need to find appropriate methods and theoretical perspectives for an adequate analysis and understanding of contemporary society.

Another task is to convey a new awareness of the standards which have traditionally been associated with the humanities: a historical perspective, linguistic competence, analytic skills, a critical attitude, knowledge and understanding of culture.

To meet these challenges is crucial, if we want to neutralize the pervasive influence of a superficial media culture, which tends to obscure important characteristics of social reality. We need to reaffirm the respect for painstaking empirical investigations, objectivity, and linguistic honesty, not the least, if we are to restore self-esteem among practitioners of the humanities.

This is not easy when fundamental values of the humanities may be contrary to the contemporary organization of education and research, political interference and short-term goals, or when both policymakers and scholars find it difficult to distinguish between research, ideology, and politics.

I am addressing the questions posed by the organizers of the conference from a Swedish perspective, but precisely because the Swedish experience in many ways is unique, I believe it might be of interest.

Sweden identifies itself as an advanced, modern nation built on knowledge and is proud of its achievements in science and technology. Our economic development was made possible by important technological inventions which led to the creation of successful industrial enterprises, laying the foundation for the high degree of economic prosperity and welfare characterizing Swedish society during much of the 20th century.

In a comparative perspective Sweden has over the years allocated large sums per capita to research¹, and in international rankings of universities Sweden, although a small nation, has been able to maintain a rather high position, albeit only a handful of universities can compete with the best in the world.

Science, thus, enjoys a fairly high prestige, and by science is usually meant the natural sciences, technology, and medicine. After the Second World War, however, there was a rapid development of the social sciences, since economics, sociology and psychology were understood as essential to the construction of a Swedish welfare society, taking place during the long reign of the Social Democratic Party. The role and status of the humanities is definitely more modest, and for the last 20 years or so, there is an on-going discussion concerning the crisis of the humanities. This is the other side of the coin, and reflects the pragmatic views on science and scholarship dominant in Swedish society. A political climate oriented towards social change will perhaps inevitably have effects on the role of research in the humanities, including cross-disciplinary studies.

Organization of Research

Several factors make it difficult to undertake multi- or interdisciplinary research in Sweden. They have to do with the organization and funding of research, as well as the character of the university system.

Another important factor is that, in contrast to many other countries, such as Germany, or those of former Yugoslavia, there are practically no independent research institutes outside the university. To the extent that such institutions do exist they are oriented towards applied research of direct interest to economic development or the management of the welfare state.

In other words, especially in the humanities, but also to a large extent in the social sciences, research is mainly being undertaken within the universities. It is financed, on the one hand, by the regular university budget and, on the other, by grants from a number of research councils. A central role is played by *The Swedish Research Council*, which is the most significant supporter of independent research. Another important actor is the *Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation*. In addition, there are

¹A substantial part of these resources used to come from private companies, for example the extremely successful pharmaceutical, telecom or automobile industries. (IVA. 2005) Today they are largely not Swedish-owned, or research has moved elsewhere.

councils or foundations, as well as government agencies, dealing with “sectorial” or “strategic” research, i.e. often politically inspired research programs dealing with socially relevant issues. There are also private foundations, but their contributions are usually on a smaller scale.

The pressure on the foundations is high; in the humanities and the social sciences about 10 per cent of the applications will receive funding from the two major councils (Geschwind and Larsson 2008:24). Moreover, the amount of money acquired by each project is small, usually sufficient to employ one person. As a rule a project will be financed for three years, and a typically Swedish problem is that large parts of the grants are lost in overhead costs.²

This situation makes it difficult to create larger research projects, which in itself is unsatisfactory, and will have tangible consequences for possible cross-disciplinary studies. To overcome this problem, from time to time, “strategic ventures” have been made, i.e. money is allocated to certain research areas, or the establishment of “centres of excellence”, sometimes cross-disciplinary, often not. The decisions to allocate these resources are made on the government level, and university faculties play a decisive role in selecting proposals to be scrutinized by the councils. However, it has turned out that this policy has not led to innovation or an increase in cross-disciplinary research. Rather, it has fortified existing structures (Benner 2004).

Notwithstanding certain evaluations³ there is a general feeling that the structure of the councils, as well as the universities, acts as a barrier towards genuine interdisciplinary studies (Benner 2004, Fornäs 2008). The councils are organized according to traditional disciplines, and members of the committees judging proposals are chosen by university faculties. At the universities themselves, there are rather strict divisions between the faculties and, due to the system of financing undergraduate and graduate studies, cooperation between faculties or even departments is not encouraged, or, if you wish, prevented on objective grounds.

The paradox is that most research is still paid for, not by the research councils, but by faculty budgets (Sörilin and Gundelach 2007:10, Geschwind and Larsson 2008:20). In practice this means that research is undertaken by professors⁴ and doctoral

²This is related to the fact that Swedish universities do not own their buildings, but pay rents to a government institution responsible for state-owned property. Apart from that, universities have tried to raise the overhead on the dubious grounds that external research projects should share the “total costs” of the university, e.g. undergraduate studies. This has led to a conflict between the foundations and the universities, as yet only partly resolved.

³Sandström et al. 2005 point out (pp 83-89) that, overall, it is not more difficult to acquire a cross-disciplinary project than a project defined as disciplinary, and that Sweden compares favourably in terms of the percentage of cross-disciplinary publications (about 16 per cent) with other European countries (p. 52). However, they also mention (p. 40) that only 4-5 per cent of projects granted by the Swedish Council for Research, describe themselves as cross-disciplinary.

⁴Traditionally, there was only one professor at a department; maybe two in disciplines with many students, like history or comparative literature. In contrast to other countries, there was no procedure of promotion from assistant professor to full professor, according to individual achievements. From 1999, though, it was possible for an associate professor (docent) to ask for promotion to professor, based on his or her merits, but after changes concerning the position of the universities and academic teachers in 2009 (“the autonomy reforms”), this will no longer be possible. That is, you cannot receive the title of professor if there is no vacant professorship or chair. This will probably have consequences for the advancement of non-mainstream research areas or inter-disciplinary studies. It may be added that the

students, and a small minority of lecturers with a PhD who are able to secure funding from the councils. Actually, most research in Sweden is done by doctoral students. Now, while in principle, and according to official documents, there should be a close relationship between higher education and research, in practice this is not the case. The government has stubbornly refused to allow university teachers to engage in research, e.g. 50 per cent of their time, as in Denmark and Norway. In general, the resources allocated to the humanities and social sciences are significantly lower in Sweden than in the neighbouring countries (Geschwind and Larsson 2008:17).

As a consequence, most research is carried out by individual scholars, who, themselves, will design and apply for a project. The director of a department will guarantee that the applicant is welcome to place his project there. However, there is a tendency to integrate individual projects not only in the general budget system, but also as part of research policies formulated by a department, faculty, or the university as a whole. In Gothenburg for example, the department of political science decides who is allowed to apply for a post-doctoral project (Sörlin and Gundelach 2008:27), and there are cases where special personnel is drafting projects for others. This is not yet a general phenomenon, since a department will gain in prestige and money from being able to secure projects, and has to rely on gifted individuals and their merits. However, the tendency is there, and in a long-term perspective the role of bureaucratic structures is gradually increasing, at the expense of individual scholars.

Individual assessment of completed projects is not common. In practice it exists to the extent that a successful scholar will be able to find a tenured position, or acquire a new project. On the other hand, external evaluations of the Research Councils, as well as of the universities are being undertaken, both quantitative and qualitative. At present there is a debate on the suitability of bibliometric methods, which are already used in the natural sciences and medicine. Should they be employed to evaluate the performance of universities, faculties, and departments, or should they also be the measure of individual performance? And, as a consequence, allocation of resources? Not surprisingly, scholars in the humanities are strongly opposing this trend.⁵

These tendencies are not necessarily a sign of a growing adaption to market principles. The system is not run according to economic rationality, which is illustrated by the administration of undergraduate studies. However, it is based on the idea of the university, and of government institutions in general, as result-oriented units similar to commercial enterprises. This is a cultural phenomenon where ideas from business economics, due to a pervasive American influence have been uncritically accepted.⁶

So, there are systemic factors which are detrimental to research in these areas, cross-disciplinary or other: there is a lack of post-doctoral positions, not enough funding from research councils, and teachers cannot engage in research as part of their ordinary

promoted professors did not enjoy the same benefits (salary, time for research) as the recruited professors (those appointed after a competition between several candidates).

⁵See, for example, Fornäs 2008, or Nordin 2009. A recent example is the discussion in the Swedish daily *Dagens Nyheter* where professor Arne Jarrick (2012) historian and general secretary of the Swedish Research Council, as well as Gustaf Nelhans (2012), doctoral student of theory of science, and dr. Björn Hammartfelt (2012), informational scientist criticize the political scientist Bo Rothstein (2012), for one-sidedly arguing for bibliometric analysis. For a general discussion on the use of possible methods, cf. Sandström et al. 2005:131-134.

⁶This is certainly a break with Swedish administrative tradition, where the civil servant, including a professor, was a *Beamter* in Max Weber's sense, representing the integrity and impartiality of the state.

duties. Thenon-existenceof independent research institutes of the kind found in other countries makes the situation more precarious.

Cross-Disciplinary Research

Discussing cross-disciplinary research, it may be useful to distinguish between *multi-disciplinary* studies and *inter-disciplinary* research. In the former case representatives from different disciplines will come together to solve a problem or study a specific area from different angles. The cooperation will have no long-term effects on those involved. Inter-disciplinary research proper, on the other hand, is based on the idea that individual disciplines will benefit from cooperation, which may lead to a re-examination of theories and methods, more or less fundamental changes in individual fields of science, and perhaps the creation of sub disciplines (Sandström et al. 2005:13-32).

In the Swedish case either type of research is more common in medicine, technology and the natural sciences⁷, than in the social sciences and, particularly, in the humanities (Sandström et al.2005:10) . However, even in the natural sciences cross-disciplinary research is more widespread among disciplines which are already close to each other(Sandström et al. 2005:9).This is partly true of the social sciences, whereas in the humanities any type of cross-disciplinary research is infrequent. They form a cluster of their own, with few ties to other disciplines (Sandström et al. 2005:35, 43).

At the same time, with certain fluctuations, cross-disciplinary research has positive connotations in political discourse (Sandström and Harding 2002, Sandström et al 2005: 90-106). However, politicians usually think of it as a means to solve practical problems. To that end certain centres have been established to study thematic issues, but they are seldom genuinely inter-disciplinary. They either develop into a new discipline, such as gender studies, which in fact has obtained the largest part of cross-disciplinary funding (Sandström et al. 2005:111), or they stay multi-disciplinary; people are doing what they were always doing, and there is no cross-fertilization between different perspectives.

In the humanities the most common form of cross-disciplinary research seems to be what has been referred to as hierarchical (Fornäs 2008:18), i.e. certain concepts or theoretical elements are borrowed, without really affecting the basic outlook of the borrowing discipline. In such cases there is a risk of simplification or misunderstanding, especially if concepts are used in a metaphorical sense, rather than as part of a consistent theoretical model.

Undergraduate Studies

It is impossible to understand the situation of research in the humanities and social sciences without mentioning the Swedish undergraduate system.

During the last 40 years we have witnessed an educational explosion with rapid growth of the number of students and the establishment of a great number of new

⁷The most successful cross-disciplinary contexts, in terms of projects and publications, are three universities: The Karolinska Institute of Medicine, The Royal Technical College (both in Stockholm) and the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Uppsala. (Sandström et al. 2005:9).

institutions of higher education (Geschwind and Terrell 2011). While this is a common trend in Europe, there are certain cultural and social dimensions specific to Sweden.

In the beginning of the 1970s there were five university cities: Stockholm, Uppsala, Lund, Gothenburg and Umeå (in the North). Today there are 39 universities or higher educational establishments. At the same time there has been no substantial increase of the total resources for higher education, which has negatively affected the position of the humanities at the larger universities. In the 1960s you could study Serbo-Croatian [Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian] in Stockholm, Gothenburg, Lund, and Uppsala. Now it is possible only in Uppsala. Recently a number of languages have been abolished at the University of Gothenburg.⁸ This actually answers the question posed by the rector of Stockholm University of why there are no specialists on Turkish society and culture.

One important change is that the education of teachers, journalists or librarians is now taken care of by special professional colleges, or even faculties. Those categorized as students of the humanities today are the "rest". They receive an education which in principle is directed towards traditional disciplinary research, which most of them will never be engaged in. Efforts to implement the Bologna principle of *employability* have been largely cosmetic.⁹

Another fundamental weakness is the system of funding undergraduate studies introduced in 1993, based on the number of admitted students and completed courses. Since this is a major source of income for a department, everyone is guarding their own students, which means that there is no incentive for cooperation, e.g. in terms of inter-disciplinary courses. The money per student varies considerably, from 4 700 euro for natural sciences to 2 000 for humanities/social sciences (Stenlås 2011:121). Education in traditional humanistic subjects is thus cheaper and often predominates at the newly established universities.

There are no entrance exams in Sweden; students are admitted on the basis of their marks from gymnasium, and whereas it is extremely difficult to get a place at e.g. a medical school, admittance is practically free in the humanities. Thus, many students are not necessarily motivated to study these disciplines. Moreover, due to changes in the school system, they have a weak background in foreign languages. Whereas earlier, students of the humanities were expected to at least read English, German and French, today English is the only language required. Thus, many students do not have the necessary knowledge or skills to study the humanities, and may not acquire them at the university. According to investigations they study 20 hours a week, lectures included¹⁰. Moreover, Sweden is on the second to last place in the OECD as far as age when finishing studies is concerned. People are 30 years old when they complete the first three-year stage of the Bologna ladder. (Boguslaw and Wadensjö 2011:53) One reason is that they start their studies 2-3 years later than their counterparts in Europe and do not finish on time (Fölster et al. 2011). If you look at employment data, those who have a

⁸ From 2013 there will be no teaching of Classical Greek, Italian, Russian, or Old Church Slavonic. Earlier, among others, Dutch, Bulgarian, Czech, Polish and Hebrew have been shut down in Gothenburg (Enkvist 2012).

⁹ In his investigation of a great number of new undergraduate programs oriented towards "culture and society", Stenlås (2011) concludes that they are mainly carrying on established disciplinary traditions, and notes that there is a problematic discrepancy between the new labels and seductive marketing-language on the homepages and the realistic possibilities of obtaining a job after completed studies.

¹⁰ See Högskoleverket [Swedish National Agency for Higher Education]: *Eurostudent*; Rapport 2010:20 R

degree in the humanities are to a higher extent unemployed and only 60 per cent work in jobs related to their studies (Boguslaw and Wadensjö 2011:60)

The changes of the school system and the universities were implemented in the name of equality, being part of a “class struggle” of sorts, where the elite culture of the university was a major target. The result of these policies is that today the share of working class children among university students is lower than before, while the reforms have consequences for the recruitment of future scholars in the humanities and partly in the social sciences. The remedy would probably be to admit fewer students to the humanities and, above all, to introduce a new regime of studies, with strict requirements and incentives to work.

The Need for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences

If I look at my own country, then, in order to play a role in culture and society the position of the humanities would have to change. This presupposes far-reaching reforms of both the school system and the organization of higher education, as well as changes of the principles for allocation of research funding. Also, a change of attitude is required among those involved in teaching and research at the universities.

As far as research is concerned, I agree with the *Young Academy of Sweden*, asking for more stability, longer duration of projects (at least five years), concentration on younger scholars, and less interference from above.¹¹ Whether you look for the social usefulness of these disciplines, or regard them as a societal conscience, this kind of activity, as any research, needs to be free. You simply do not know in advance what discoveries will be made or which ideas may arise. In a civilized society there must be a space for reflection, built on empirical studies of reality, without any other reason than curiosity and the drive to understand. Why? Because, no one else is doing it. This is a major responsibility of the humanities and the social sciences.

There is no contradiction between the ideal of independent research and the education of useful professionals. Obviously society will need people who are trained in languages, who possess methodological skills in the analysis of texts and other data, who have a capacity for reflection based on knowledge. Such people, however, can only be trained by independent scholars, enjoying a certain amount of freedom and security. In addition, Sweden would need independent centres for both basic and applied research manned by highly skilled personnel. Here there is room for cooperation between the social sciences and the humanities.

It is sometimes argued that inter-disciplinary research is a practical matter. If needed, it will arise naturally according to the demands of scientist and scholars (Sandström et al. 2005:8). While this is true, I do believe that there is a specific need for interdisciplinary research in the humanities and the social sciences. The existing disciplinary barriers are not given by nature, but are a result of convention and historical coincidence. You could argue that in some cases the epistemological differences are so

¹¹ The Young Academy of Sweden was founded by the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences in 2011. The aim is to "create an interdisciplinary forum and research-political platform for young researchers in Sweden". It will eventually consist of 40 highly qualified members from different areas, although most of the 22 present members belong to medicine and the natural sciences. Recently they published their suggestions on the forthcoming governmental proposal on a new research policy. See "Vägen till friare och djärvare forskning. Ett förslag i tio punkter inför forskningspropositionen 2012 från Sveriges unga akademi"

great that cooperation is precluded. This, I believe is only partly true. What we have is essentially a set of methods and theoretical perspectives. If there are parallel or opposite theoretical explanations, only empirical investigations may decide. In the humanities certain types of theories have been extremely popular, perhaps because they are hard to disprove, but allow for interesting reflections. However, a scholarship which is expressed in an esoteric language, with doubtful empirical underpinning, and where criticism is divorced from knowledge, has not much to offer, and you cannot expect society to listen to self-appointed sages. It would be a very peculiar situation if, let's say, medicine or neuroscience had an explanation of human behaviour, which is contrary to the humanities, and presumably "reductionist", but is able to deliver, e.g. cure sick people.

One could argue, like Nassim Nicholas Taleb, that historians and other scholars should leave the theories behind and try to describe reality as accurately as possible.¹² Another way would be openness towards the social sciences, but also other areas of research. If the role of the humanities and the social sciences is to understand and explain human behaviour, culture, and society, there is no need to guard a specific discourse or theoretical presuppositions related to specific academic cultures. The important question today is the relative importance of biological, cultural, and social factors, which demands a more sophisticated approach both in the humanities and social sciences. At the intersection of linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and brain research, supported by innovations in computer software, some of the most exciting new research is taking place (cf. e.g. Johnson 2006, Lakoff and Johnson 1999, Damasio 2010), which undoubtedly will have consequences for the humanities and social sciences.

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¹²This view is elaborated in Taleb 2007 and 2010. In the Glossary of *The Black Swan*, Taleb (2010:302) refers to: "*Epilogism*: a theory free method of looking at history with minimal generalization and with consciousness of the side effect of making causal claims. The idea is not to go too much outside the observations, minimize claims about the unseen".

[see also: <http://www.fooledbyrandomness.com/blackswanglossary.htm>]

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Шел Магнусон

Хуманистичке и друштвене науке у Шведској. Дилеме и могућности интердисциплинарних истраживања

Док су изазови са којима се друштвене и хуманистичке науке суочавају на глобалном нивоу слични – у погледу проналажења метода и теорија за адекватну анализу савременог друштва, као и реафирмације вредности које се традиционално везују за хуманистичке науке – Шведска из више углова представља специфичан случај.

Наука и технологија се сматрају врло престижним, и шведско друштво улаже велике суме новца у научна истраживања. После Другог светског рата дошло је до брзог развоја друштвених наука, од којих се очекивало да играју важну улогу у грађењу модерног друштва благостања. Са друге стране, средства усмерена према хуманистичким наукама мања су него у суседним земљама, што утиче како на традиционалне тако и на интердисциплинарне научне студије. Осим тога, развој нових институција за више образовање има конкретне последице по положај хуманистичких наука при већим универзитетима.

Поред ових питања, такође, одређене структуралне карактеристике, као што су организација универзитета и систем додељивања новчаних средстава за истраживање, утицаће на мотивацију за мултидисциплинарне студије. Из објективних (економских) разлога, сарадња међу факултетима је прилично ретка, а истраживачки савети, одговорни за финансирање пројеката, организовани су у складу са научним дисциплинама. Стога, интердисциплинарне или мултидисциплинарне студије обично бивају део засебних подухвата, често оријентисаних према примењеним или политички релевантним научним истраживањима, која су повезана са економским питањима или државом благостања – на пример, стамбена питања, тржиште рада, социјални проблеми, делимично миграције, а одскоро и родне студије.

Истовремено, постоји велика потреба за интердисциплинарношћу. И друштвеним и хуманистичким наукама би користила ближа сарадња у методологији и теорији, посебно када се узму у обзир револуционарне научне студије на међународном нивоу, чије ће последице у овим областима, по свему судећи, бити далекосежне.

Кључне речи:
Шведска, друштвене
и хуманистичке
науке, финансирање,
универзитети и
институти