

## BOOK REVIEW

# Larsson/Magdalenić: Sociology in Sweden

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Larsson, Anna, and Sanja Magdalenić (2015) *Sociology in Sweden: A History*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

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This is a book in the Palgrave Macmillan series of short national histories of sociology, by two members of the academic millennial generation whose sociological formation was largely centered on studying the discipline. After a very brief sketch of its pre-history – including a mention of Maxim Kovalevsky's (the key founder of Russian sociology) sixteen lectures in Stockholm in 1888 and the dead-end professorship (1903) in economics and sociology of Strindberg's former assistant Gustaf Steffen – the authors follow institutional Swedish sociology from its foundation in 1947 into the twenty-first century. They have adopted three perspectives as their guiding principles. 1. Scientific boundaries and their making; 2. The issue of gender; 3. The interconnection between the Swedish welfare state and the social sciences and scientists.

The founding history is the best part, outlining the domestic and international political context of the establishment of a peculiar current of American sociology, obsolete and dead in the US soon after it was enshrined in Sweden, where it remained central textbook literature until the mid-1960s. That was the positivism of George Lundberg. Possible directions therewith discarded, various European traditions, Durkheim, Pareto, Weber, excavated by Talcott Parsons in the 1930s, and ethnological research, are hinted at, although the nomination procedures excluding their protagonists are not brought to light. The founding history rightly puts Torgny Segerstedt Jr, the incumbent of the first sustainable chair of sociology, as the overtowering, dominating figure and gives a spare outline of his basic theoretical position, coming out of philosophy itself more sophisticated than Lundberg's.

After outlining the founding moment, well covered in previous Swedish literature, the authors deploy their particular approach, focusing on "how the ideas and rhetoric of sociology were implemented as institutional and organizational practices". The authors' explicit choice and their faithful pursuit of it put into relief the two poles of writing a history of an academic discipline.

At one pole, you write a history of science, or an intellectual history, focusing on the significant works produced, their production, their main findings/arguments, their reception, and the discussions and new departures they give rise to. At the other you write a history of a profession,

concentrating on its organization, its boundary-drawing, its membership, and their self-identity. In principle both approaches could be used by the same author(s) in the same book, but the small Palgrave format promotes a clear preference for one or the other.

Larsson and Magdalenic give us a vivid story of organizational practices in Swedish sociology, in particular glimpses of the reorientation around 1968, e.g., at the department in Stockholm, where the syllabus suddenly changed from the local professor's nine books to include Marx, Lenin, Mao, and Lin Biao's Long Live the Victory in the People's War, as well as an extended narrative of women's slow but decisive march upwards through the departments and the association of sociology. They further include a story of the academic women's band Busy Woman, who performed at the conferences of the Swedish Sociological Association, and among whom six members later became university professors.

Scientific output is treated by the authors as events, such as the two largest research projects and the public debate around them, the longitudinal "Project Metropolitan" on the Stockholm cohort of 1953, the Level of Living reports of the 1970s with press headlines of the time, and the methodological debate in mid-1960s on "soft" (qualitative) and "hard" (quantitative) data.

In several ways this is a good book for its genre and format. However, it comes with an intellectual price. There is little attention to and no discussion of scientific or intellectual achievement. This is also underlined in the references, which do not list a single major work by major Swedish sociologists after Segerstedt. Many of the latter do appear in the references, but only with circumstantial discussion pieces. The most distinguished sociologist of the post-1968 generation, Peter Hedström, is not even mentioned anywhere.

The authors neglect many opportunities for raising intellectual questions with respect to their own guidelines. For instance, the evolving post-foundation boundaries and non-boundary interfaces with economics, political science, ethnology, epidemiology and social medicine, ethnology, social work, and philosophy of science each important to weighty groups of Swedish sociology practitioners. The welfare state connections are taken note of, but hardly during the neoliberal turn of the latest twenty-five years. Much attention is given to gender relations within sociology, little to sociological gender analyses. No curiosity in the authors is awakened by the impression many people have, that in spite of its early international profile through Alva Myrdal, and allowing for the Norwegian recruitment of a significant practitioner, Karin Widerberg, to a chair in Oslo, Swedish Feminist sociology, and Swedish Feminism in general, have been less influential internationally than, say, Danish and Norwegian Feminism.

This is a history of sociology as a profession, like a profession of social workers or of accountants, restricted to academia, which is the Swedish sociology profession's self-identity, in contrast to a wider conception in other Nordic countries. Sociology as a profession has a legitimate right to a history, and this is not a bad one. But those of us who are interested in sociology mainly as an intellectual adventure, we have to look elsewhere.