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The Question of Civil Society in a Scandinavian Welfare State: Focusing on Older People in Sweden

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Sweden is generally considered to be a prime example of the Social Democratic or the Scandinavian regime type of welfare states. Constructed around the principles of universalism, comprehensive risk coverage, and generous benefit levels and based on publicly funded and organized broad welfare systems, Sweden may give the impression of being a country where “everything is taken care of by the state.” Therefore, it has often been assumed that Sweden is a country where civil society is weak. Extensive research in the Scandinavian countries in the past 20 years has repeatedly refuted this assumption, however: Sweden has a civil society that is as extensive, important, and vital as in many other Western countries.

This paper takes its point of departure from this background and goes on to describe recent trends of change in Sweden—in boundaries and patterns of interdependence between the sectors of society, notably between the State and civil society. Within this context, the second part of the paper focuses on older people and their roles and activities in civil society in Sweden, a country that has one of the oldest populations in the world. One area addressed is involvement by older people in voluntary organizations. Another area to be addressed has to do with informal help and caregiving—with a focus on older Swedish people as providers.

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1. Introduction

The topic of this paper[1)] is civil society in a Scandinavian welfare state, focusing on older people. The overall question of the paper is: Can there really be a strong and dynamic civil society in a country like Sweden, with its Scandinavian welfare model, and, if so, what role do older people play in that civil society?

1.1 Sweden

Sweden is a country in northern Europe. It is a part of what we call the Nordic countries and also part of Scandinavia. It has approximately 9.5 million inhabitants, and, like Japan, an aging population, as well as low birth rates like many Western countries have, along with people living increasingly long lives. In the year 2000, Sweden was the first country to have five percent of its population at age 80 or older.

Further, it is calculated that the number of 80-year-olds and older will double from 2000 to 2050, so we really need to think about what sort of lives we can have as older people, and how to take care of the so-called care burden.

Sweden has high labor market participation—higher than the European Union average—particularly for women, and older people actually remain employed in paid jobs rather late compared to European standards. The official age of retirement is 65, but recent numbers from Statistics Sweden report that in the age group of 67 to 74, 15 percent are working (Statistics Sweden 2013).

1.2 Longer lives

We can live longer and longer lives. There is no end, no limit to how old we can become, apparently, but nevertheless we experience a few years of frailty toward the end. We need care. We need help toward the end of our lives. Concerning older people, there are often two different discourses. One says that old people are really a burden: they need extensive care, which costs a lot of money, and they are “time-consuming.” The other discourse says that, today, older people are active, healthy, and often reasonably well-to-do. Here, we are usually speaking about those born in the 1940s. I think that a realistic picture would combine the discourses or position itself somewhere in-between. We live longer, we are active, but we are not always so healthy and able to function autonomously. While we may be active citizens, we might need social care at the same time. So this is *one point of departure*. Now, I proceed to consider whether it is possible to have a strong civil society in a Scandinavian welfare state.

2. Sweden and the Scandinavian Regime Type of Welfare

Sweden is usually considered to be some sort of prime example of what is called the social democratic, or Scandinavian, regime type in Europe (Esping-Andersen et al. 2002; Jeppsson Grassman 2009). It is based on principles like universalism, and everyone is included in its welfare services. It has high comprehensive risk coverage. Its citizens are covered through insurance and other services for all sorts of risks they may run. It has

relatively generous benefit levels. And it is also built around the idea of high and full employment. The realization of these principles has halted to some extent in the past 15 years. Yet the model pre-supposes high labor participation: it cannot work without the majority of people paying taxes. Both men and women have high labor participation (Stephens 1996).

We have comprehensive care for children and older people that is paid, organized, and, to various degrees, provided by the local state. Most of the things that concern welfare are the responsibility of the local government or state in Sweden. So we have home care for the elderly, and daycare for the younger children (Jegermalm and Jeppsson Grassman 2009b, 2011b).

Sweden is often considered a country of strong state[2]. This could be debated, but is it possible to have a strong civil society in a country where, according to prevailing ideas, the "state takes care of everything"? Many international scholars were, until about 20 years ago, convinced that we had a very weak civil society, that the Scandinavian countries were in a certain way horrors, examples of what happens if "state provides everything." But research in Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Denmark in the last 20 years has actually refuted this assumption (Anheier and Salamon 1999; Trägårdh 2007). Sweden may have a strong welfare state, but it also actually has a strong civil society. While it does not have its strength in regular welfare provision, it is strong in other areas and respects.

3. Characteristics of the Swedish Civil Society

Civil society is a vague concept. It has been used in different ways with different interpretations (Janoski 1998). One way of seeing it is to regard it as a social sphere separate from the state and the market, so we often talk about state, market, and civil society. The concept of civil society, as I will use it in this paper, comprises the voluntary sector with its organizations and activities, associations, parishes, and such entities on the one hand. On the other hand, it also includes other aspects, such as informal networks, family, neighbors, and informal help (Jegermalm and Jeppsson Grassman 2009a,b, 2011 a,b). In both of these areas, there is extensive unpaid work going on. In the voluntary organizations, this is in the form of what is called "volunteering," and outside of organizations, it takes the form of unpaid help for family, neighbors, and others, which we call informal help and caring. These differences are important to notice.

I should also say that it is quite uncommon in Sweden for older parents to live with their adult children. Adult children help their parents quite a bit, but parents live in their own homes, or, less commonly, in nursing homes. So when we talk about informal help and care, we are talking about all sorts of helping; for instance, it might mean an older daughter helping an aging mother who lives in her own apartment or house. Or it might mean a person helping a neighbor shovel snow in the winter.

Swedish civil society is characterized by an important voluntary sector rooted in popular movements. This sector is as large as in other European countries, but it does not have a major role in the provision of core health or social services and care (Jeppsson

Grassman 2006; Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg 2007). What do I mean by "rooted in popular movements?"

Sweden was very influenced in the 19th century by some broad movements that swept across Europe some with strong influence from the United States. Workers', religious, and temperance movements were strong in Sweden, and they were built on broad membership, mutual aid, advocacy, and rather democratic structures. We actually have many associations with this profile in the welfare field as well. The principle is that we help each other because we share the same problems or have issues in common, and we advocate for better conditions. Many of these associations are in the disability area; others concern older people. There are huge associations for retired people in which members both help each other and are very strong lobbyists, vis-à-vis the government (Trädgårdh 2007).

The major share of work in the voluntary sector in Sweden is carried out in the form of unpaid activities, or volunteering (Curtis et al. 2001; Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg 2007). This sector has a popular character, much more popular than in many central European countries. This has to do with the fact that it does not have a core role in welfare provision, for which there is always a mandatory requirement for professionals and paid staff. In volunteer work in Sweden, many older people are involved (Jegermalm and Jeppsson Grassman 2011a).

We need to regard civil society from a relational perspective. One cannot understand the civil society of a country unless one looks at its interfaces and relations with other sectors. In Sweden, the extensive welfare state shapes civil society to a great extent. Civil society, at least when we are talking about associations, does other things than provide welfare.

Informal unpaid work is also very important, and comprises unpaid caregiving to a great extent. That is, it is very common to carry out unpaid help for kinfolk, friends, and neighbors in Sweden. To sum up, images about civil society in a country of the Swedish type have been refuted in the past 20 years, not least by some of the research in which I have been involved (Jegermalm and Jeppsson Grassman 2009a, b, 2011a, b; Jeppsson Grassman and Svedberg 2007).

4. Volunteers 65+: A Comparative Perspective

Now let us look at some figures for volunteering, or unpaid work, by people 65 or older in a comparative way. I conducted a study a couple of years ago with an Australian colleague on this subject, and data from that research is illustrated in Table 1 (Warburton & Jeppsson Grassman 2011). Odds ratios are shown here:

Table 1 shows volunteering among people 65 and over in six countries. The odds ratios build on computed material from the 2005–2006 wave of the World Values Survey[3]. Of the studied countries, volunteering among older people is most common in Australia and Britain. Sweden is also a country which ranks rather high here, with Japan in the middle. Italy and Germany are countries where volunteering, or unpaid work in organizations, among people 65 and over is not as common as in the other countries.

Table 1 Volunteering by people 65+ in six countries

Country	TOTAL	MEN	WOMEN
Australia	2.61***	2.38**	3.20***
Britain	2.11*	1.85*	2.53**
Sweden	1.90**	1.36**	2.94**
Japan	1.32	1.34	1.29
Italy	0.96	0.67	1.19
Germany	1.00	1.00	1.00

* p<.05 ** p<.01 *** p< .001

Table 2 Volunteering among people 65+ in social welfare organizations

Country	ALL
Australia	3.89***
Britain	3.38***
Sweden	3.16***
Italy	2.71**
Japan	0.74
Germany	1.00

These two are family-oriented countries. One explanation for these lower numbers might be that older people have no time for unpaid work in organizations. They may extensively focus on family care. The six countries studied also vary as to their welfare models. However, the sample here is too small for any conclusions about the connection between welfare models and volunteer work to be drawn.

Among men, we find the same ranking pattern as in the overall figures shown in Table 2. Volunteering among women 65 and over is most common in Australia and Sweden, both ranking higher than Britain. Japan ranks lower, in a group with Italy and Germany.

Table 2 focuses on volunteering in social welfare organizations by people 65 and over. The indicator used in the World Values Survey of social welfare organizations has rather limited scope, and seems to mirror Anglo-Saxon conditions. It does not seem to fit conditions in all the countries. Sweden comes out with a rather high rank here, and Japan does not seem to have a lot of people 65 and over volunteering in social welfare organizations.

What could a welfare organization be in Sweden? It would not be a charity. In Sweden, volunteering in a welfare organization might mean, for instance, unpaid work in an organization that regroups spouses to persons suffering from dementia. These

organizations build on the principle of shared experience. People with common experiences—as spouses or patients, for example, get together, support each other, and, at the same time, they advocate outwardly to try to improve conditions for people who share the same illness as their spouses or who share their own illness or disability. Such organizations are quite common in Sweden. The Red Cross, Save the Children, and other such groups are also strong organizations in Sweden, but not as strong overall as some of these mutual support welfare organizations, and that goes for younger people as well as for those 65 and over.

5. The Swedish Welfare State in Transition

There is also a common discourse today that concerns demographic challenges. It is concerned with the fact that many countries have aging populations, low birth rates, and new family and generational patterns. This discourse is widespread in Europe, and may be a topic of discussion in Japan as well. How can we survive as welfare states? This is the question that I wish to address in the next section of my paper.

"Welfare states in transition" is a very common sort of rhetoric these days among scholars, but it actually extends to politicians and, perhaps, to citizens in general (Gilbert 2002; Jeppsson Grassman 2009). Actually, we have seen some important transitions in the European welfare states, particularly since the late 1980s. Sweden is a good example.

Sweden suffered a very severe economic crisis in the beginning of the 1990s, along with, among others, Finland, a country that was hit very hard by this crisis. At the same time, this economic crisis coincided with new ideological trends in Sweden—more market-oriented thinking, for example (Jeppsson Grassman et al. 2010). We were not the only ones: many European countries seemed to go through the same type of transition.

We saw cuts in public expenditure. We saw hard new priorities. One example concerns public elder care: the elderly may still receive public home help today, but according to stricter selection criteria. One needs to be really frail in order to get extensive help. However, those who are less frail or have less urgent needs for care, will not receive help today the way they once could in Sweden, for instance in the 1970s and 1980s. So one expression of the transition is that different priorities characterize the welfare systems now than 20 years ago as to who is eligible for a service, as well as with regard to the question of coverage (Jegermalm and Jeppsson Grassman 2011b).

Another ingredient in the contemporary welfare discourse has to do with "welfare mixes," the mixed model of welfare. This has various implications in different countries. In Sweden, where welfare has traditionally been provided by the state and family, "welfare mix" now means that we are more influenced by market solutions and, to some extent, by the involvement of the voluntary sector. All sectors of society are supposed to be involved in welfare provision. We see some new ways of organizing and providing welfare. For instance, in the provision of elder care, the market—for-profit providers—has become quite strong in the past 20 years. The same goes for development in the area of schools. But in line with all this, there is now also increasing expectation concerning unpaid work from citizens. This represents a kind of rupture in our welfare model as

compared to how we used to view it. Families are expected to do more unpaid care work, for instance, and in local communities there are increasing expectations regarding unpaid work by volunteers, not least of whom are 65 or older and are presumed to have spare time. So one aspect of the welfare state transition has to do with the intensified focus on unpaid work, both with regard to volunteering and informal help and care.

6. Changes in Civic Involvement by People 65+

So how have these transitional patterns in the Swedish welfare state impacted the unpaid involvement of those 65 or older?

Figure presents patterns of change in volunteering and informal help- and caregiving over 13 years, from 1992 to 2005. Together with some colleagues, I have been conducting national surveys that are representative of Sweden as a whole with regard to volunteering, unpaid work in organizations, and informal care and help since 1992, so data is available for quite a few years. What one can see here, is the rate of volunteering in general, for the whole population, for 1992, 1998, and 2005. Volunteering in associations is thus very common, at a rate of almost 50 percent. This has not changed much over these years.

Volunteering among those who are 60 to 74 is a little less common (second bar from the left). In 1992, it was just under 40 percent, but it has *increased.* As for informal help, this has increased considerably in 2005 as compared to 1992 and 1998. The group that has increased its activities *most of all* are those who are 65 to 74 (rightmost bars). One may perhaps argue that, at this time of transition, it is the older people in Sweden who seem to have taken on the role of pillars of civil society.

The recently retired also carry out extensive unpaid work for those who are old and frail. Should this pattern be interpreted as a sign of a failing welfare state where citizens, not the least of whom are 65 to 74, are substituting their unpaid work for what the state provided before? This is a much-debated question in many countries in Europe, including in the Nordic countries.

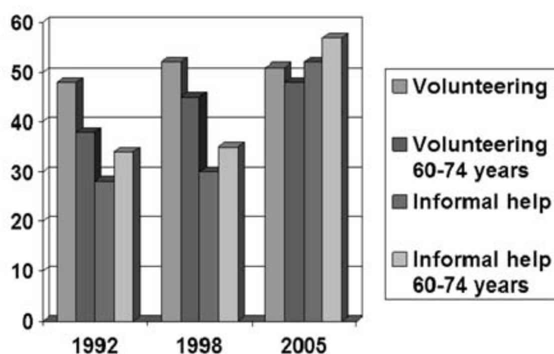

Figure Engagement in Swedish Civil Society 1992–2005

Or should it be regarded as civil society increasing, as a good sign because the concept of civil society is usually invested with positive connotations? It is good to have a strong civil society. But if civil society starts taking over the responsibilities that we have learned to connect with the welfare state, how should we interpret that? This is an open question. Maybe both interpretations are valid and should be considered together.

Now let us look at the voluntary sector in Swedish elder care (Jeppsson Grassman 2006). If we have more and more volunteers carrying out unpaid welfare work, and if we tend to have more welfare mixes, does this mean that the voluntary organizations have positioned themselves more clearly as actors when it comes to elder care? Actually, it would not be so. We have extensive unpaid volunteer work, but the organizations as professional providers have not increased their share of the market by much in the past 20 years. It is the for-profit companies that have taken on an important share of the elder care and increased their efforts, while the same is not true for the voluntary organizations. They have never been core providers of elder care; rather, they have acted as more of a complement to the services provided by the public sector. Nevertheless, the voluntary sector takes on some small-but-longstanding niches of welfare provision. For instance, many voluntary organizations run nursing homes. They also provide services for the homeless elderly. Care in the voluntary sector is very often of a different type. It is created through membership, belonging, and mutual support. What we have seen in the past 20 years is more local welfare volunteer activities—volunteer bureaus, for instance. The idea is that an organization or a local government sets up a small bureau that one can visit and say, "I want to do unpaid work," and one can also say, "I need help." Then, the local government or the organization matches those in need with those who are prepared to provide some unpaid work. This is an Anglo-Saxon tradition (Davis Smith and Gay 2005), but it has become reasonably strong in Scandinavia as well. In this area, there is quite a bit of collaboration between voluntary organizations and municipalities.

7. Conclusion

Is it good to have so much activity from older people in civil society, or is it exploitation? This is also a hot topic in Sweden. There is a risk, especially if we believe that some of these cuts in public welfare provision are substituted by unpaid work, that volunteers or informal help and caregivers will become exploited. It may be hard to set limits once one is involved. Many older volunteers may feel obliged to carry out unpaid work, and volunteering should be a choice. Informal care and help is based more on obligation; there is a risk of exploitation.

But in our national surveys, volunteers and informal help and caregivers 65 and over turned out to rate their own health as better, have more informal networks, and trust more in other people than those who did neither volunteer work nor carried out informal help and care. They seemed to feel more included as citizens in society than those who were not involved in any of these activities. They had a role. And those many people who, to our great surprise, were involved as volunteers *as well as* informal help and care scored highest of all on self-rated health and trust. We may need to be needed. We need

to feel that we fulfill a role in areas where there is a need for something.

Finally, Swedish people who are 65 or older carry out extensive unpaid work in civil society, in spite of the fact that we have a strong (but changing) welfare state. It is a question of devoting many unpaid hours to associations, neighbors, family, and friends. No other group in Sweden has increased its unpaid involvement as much as those 65 and over in the past 15 to 20 years, and this is particularly true for informal unpaid work. These people are pillars of civil society who give extensively, but perhaps also receive much in return. Volunteer work in particular seems to enhance health, belonging, and trust.

A strong civil society is possible in a welfare state of the Scandinavian type. But in a transition implying cuts in public welfare, if the government expects citizens—not least younger retired people—to take over and substitute for these cutbacks, they are most certainly on the wrong path, in my opinion.

Notes

1) Eva Jeppsson Grassman was conducting research at the National Institute for the Study of Ageing and Later Life (NISAL) as well when she gave a lecture related to this paper at the international symposium “Towards a Society that Lives in Hope: Thoughts on Well-being and Civil Society in Sweden and Japan” on November 7, 2010, at the National Museum of Ethnology (NME). Jeppsson Grassman has conducted the research for this paper partly as a member of the core research project of NME: Anthropology of Care and Education for Life, 2011–2013 (representative: Nanami Suzuki).
2) In the overarching sense, which also includes local state-municipality.
3) The World Value Survey (WVS) is a worldwide investigation of sociocultural and political change, and includes more than 80 countries. Since 1981, five waves have been conducted (WVS homepage 2008).

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