

Abstract

Title: Dialectic of Dissolution. Culture and Political Modernity in Sweden at the turn of the Twentieth Century.

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This is a dissertation about liberal education and political culture in Sweden during the period 1880 to 1920. Theoretically, the account link up with the concept of modernity. Critique is directed against the division of modern life into classical modernity and second modernity, or high modernity and postmodernity, etc. The theories of Peter Wagner are referred to, and it is argued that the uncertainty which today is claimed to prevail – and often is put in relation to an indeterminable future for liberal democracy – also characterises the early 20th century's debates on politics and public culture. Wagner denotes this epoch the first crisis of modernity, which is a period of societal dissolution with an apparent struggle between those who are sure and determined and those who, on the contrary, emphasises that which is uncertain and free floating. Four case studies with a focus on the question of how cultural conditions can interact with or counteract a more democratic development are carried out. One study treats the Royal Library's institutionalisation as the Swedish national library; the second study concerns cultural considerations connected to the civic commitment of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences; the third study deals with the great library reform of 1912; and the fourth study directs its attention towards the circle around the liberal educator and cultural critic Knut Kjellberg (1867–1921). Using theoretical perspectives aimed at problems and ethical tribulations in the communication culture that dominates the area of debate as well as the epoch at large are presented. This means that visions of absolute modernity and more tolerant or neo-sceptical views are analysed, as they meander around each other, converge and are pulled apart along a number of conflicting lines. The conclusion is that the political culture oriented towards relativism – which during a period gained a certain success – loses its support at the end of the twenties, according to the pattern Wagner describes as a transition from the first crisis of modernity to an organized modernity. The thesis summarises this development as a dialectic of dissolution.

Keywords: Reflexive historical sociology, political modernity, uncertainty, problematisation, scepticism, political culture, liberal education, library history, reading culture, Sweden.