

Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and
Swedish Perspectives

Karin Sporre &
H Russel Botman [eds.]

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Building a Human Rights Culture
South African and Swedish Perspectives

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CONTRIBUTORS

Mr *J P Abrahams*, Lecturer, Philosophy, University of the Western Cape. Researching the relationship between technology and society.

Dr *Denise Ackermann*, Extraordinary Professor, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch. Presently researching a feminist theology of praxis in the South African context.

Dr *Erik Amnå*, Associate Professor, Political Science, Göteborg University. Program director of Young Citizens Program, a comparative, multidisciplinary study of adolescents and young adults in 28 countries. Former principal secretary of The Swedish Governmental Democracy Commission.

Ms *Åsa Bartholdsson*, Lecturer, Social Anthropology, Högskolan Dalarna. Presently concluding a PhD thesis concerning ideas about what constitutes normality of children within Swedish schools.

Dr *H Russel Botman*, Professor, Missiology, University of Stellenbosch. Ongoing research: Social ethics, Globalization, Values and Virtues.

Dr *Lindsay Clowes*, Lecturer, Women's & Gender Studies programme, University of the Western Cape. Research interests: representations of African masculinities in the South African media.

Dr *Ernst M. Conradie*, Associate Professor, Systematic Theology and Ethics, University of the Western Cape. Research focus: Ecological theology and Systematic Theology in the African context.

Mr *Jan Gröndahl*, Lecturer, History, Högskolan Dalarna. Presently concluding a PhD thesis concerning Swedish social policy towards single mothers and their children 1900–1940.

Dr *Stina Jeffner*, Associate Professor, Sociology, Högskolan Dalarna. Researching violence against women. Presently working on a project with young women who themselves are using violence.

Dr *Nico Koopman*, Senior Lecturer, Systematic Theology and Ethics; Director of the Beyers Naudé Centre for Public Theology, Faculty of Theology, University of Stellenbosch. Researching public moral and theological issues from the perspective of theological anthropology.

Dr *Ulf Magnusson*, Associate Professor, History, Högskolan Dalarna. Researching the status and role of civic associations in one of the old industrial regions in Central Sweden.

Dr *Kathy Nadasen*, Lecturer, Anthropology/Sociology, University of Western Cape. Embarking on menopausal research amongst Indian women in South Africa.

Dr *Judith Narrowe*, Associate Professor, Social Anthropology, Högskolan Dalarna. Currently researching "Perceptions of Gender, Sexuality and HIV-AIDS among male and female students at an Ethiopian teachers college."

Dr *Lars Petterson*, Professor, History, Högskolan Dalarna. Currently involved in a research project on national values in Swedish historiography.

Ms *Miranda N Pillay*, Lecturer, Ethics and New Testament Studies, University of the Western Cape. Doctoral research centres around the "normative" value of reading a New Testament document ethically in the context of HIV/AIDS in South Africa. Also involved in in-service training/workshops for teachers on integrating human rights and values in the curriculum.

Dr *Karin Sporre*, Associate Professor, Ethics, Högskolan Dalarna. Research: member of the research group "Shared values?" exploring the Swedish school in a growingly more multicultural Sweden, feminist theology and ethics.

ECONOMIC EQUALITY, CIVIC TRADITIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

BY ULF MAGNUSSON

By all international standards, Sweden is still a welfare state. It is also a very egalitarian society. But in the last few decades inequality has slowly increased in a number of ways.

This trend, I will argue, has already had some adverse effects on the ability to exercise some human rights, especially those related to Articles 20 and 21 in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These articles deal with the freedom of assembly and association and with the right to take part in the government of the country, directly or through chosen representatives. It is also possible to argue that some other human rights have been affected in a more direct way. Articles 22, 23, 24 and 25 all include rights related to employment, work conditions, payment, rest and leisure, standard of living, social protection and similar issues. In times of increased inequality, it is more or less unavoidable that these rights are affected in a negative way.

I will, furthermore, assert that there is a causal connection between these two types of human rights in so far that the last set of rights is a precondition for the first. Or to put it more bluntly: if you lack material assets, if you are hindered by sickness, disability, lack of rest and leisure, you are less likely to participate in social activities and to act as a responsible citizen participating in the democratic process. This is more accentuated the less equal you feel to your fellow citizens.

As I partly base my arguments on the works of Robert Putnam and the debate he has triggered, this will also be the point of departure for this article.

The Point of Departure: Robert Putnam's Thesis

In his book: *Making Democracy Work*, already considered to be a modern classic, Putnam examines regional differences in Italy concerning a number of variables, in one way or another related to the overall issue of democracy. (Putnam, 1993) The major part of the research is related to the introduction of the new regional governments in 1970. The result indicates a very clear

distinction between the northern and southern parts of Italy in virtually all the aspects investigated: the effectiveness of the new governments, the economic performances of the regions, the political participation of the citizens, the cooperation between political parties and satisfaction with life. It eventually all boils down to a difference in civic traditions that can be traced far back in history. In Putnam's own words:

Although all these regional governments seemed identical on paper, their levels of effectiveness varied dramatically. Systematic inquiry showed that the quality of governance was determined by longstanding traditions of civic engagement (or its absence). Voter turnout, newspaper readership, membership in choral societies and football clubs – these were the hallmarks of a successful region. In fact, historical analysis suggested that these networks of organized reciprocity and civic solidarity, far from being an epiphenomenon of socio-economic modernization, were a precondition for it. (Putnam, 1995, p. 66)

The more people meet, the more social trust and networks facilitating communication and coordination, build up to create a foundation forming the *social capital* upon which the vigour of economic activities depends. Thus, social capital is as vital to economic performance as physical and human capital, Putnam argues. Since social capital "allows dilemmas of collective action to be resolved" (Putnam, 1996, p. 67), the transaction costs normally involved in employments and other types of agreements related to economic activities, are lower than in a society characterized by distrust and vertical social relations.

In *Bowling Alone* (following his Italian study), Putnam takes on to investigate the vigour of American civic life in the last three decades of the 20th century. As the title suggest, his findings are not very edifying. Instead of bowling in teams like they used to do, and at the same time drinking beer, eating pizza and socializing, Americans nowadays bowl alone. From being a nation engaged in all kinds of civic associations and activities, like churches, sports clubs, unions, socializing with neighbours and friends, etc., Americans tend to refrain from social activities, even within the realm of family. This has also affected political participation in terms of voter turnout, attendance at political meetings, interest in discussing political issues and the frequency of newspaper reading, *despite* the fact that education – the factor normally considered to have the largest effect on political participation – has increased.

But why has civic engagement decreased? Putnam's answer develops along four lines:

1. *Lack of time and money*, especially in families where both parties work;
2. "*Suburbanization*", Americans spend more and more time commuting, and therefore have less time to engage in local activities;
3. *Electronic entertainment*, especially TV; and
4. *Generational effects*, which Putnam considers to be the most important factor: the younger generations are much less engaged in civic activities. (Putnam, 2000, section III)

Putnam has caused a lively debate, resulting in a virtual flood of articles and books, not only in the USA, but also in the rest of the world, including Sweden. (SOU 2000:1)

In the preface to the Swedish edition of *Bowling Alone*, two prominent professors of political science, Olof Petersson and Bo Rothstein, acknowledge the great importance of Putnam's work (which in Sweden has had a great influence upon the extensive official report on democracy in 2000 (SOU 2000:1)), but they also point to the criticism he has met among other scholars. One problem is Putnam's definition of *social capital*, which is too broad to be of much analytic use. Also, declining civic activity is more or less an American phenomenon, some of the critics claim. Petersson and Rothstein agree that Sweden also faces dwindling memberships in political parties and other, mainly traditional, types of associations, but that this has not affected the strength of social networks or mutual trust. Lastly they point to the difficulty in determining what types of civic associations can be said to promote mutual trust and democracy. (Petterson & Rothstein, 2001, p. 7–11)¹

Bowling in Sweden

Bowling has never been as popular in Sweden as in the USA. But we do bowl, and at least the bowling hall in my own town is a very social place, where kids celebrate their birthday parties together with parents and friends, where workmates meet after work to have a good time together. So, what is there to be said about Sweden in relation to the findings of Putnam?

Sweden still rates very high on most of the parameters of civic virtues: voter turnout, newspaper readership, union membership and membership in other

1 In their preface to the Swedish edition, Pettersson and Rothstein also criticise Putnam for blaming big government for the decline of civic disengagement. In fact Putnam is of the *opposite* opinion. He *even* points to the countries of Scandinavia as the best example of a high positive correlation between social capital and high welfare expenditures.

types of civic associations are all among the highest in the world. Still, I am not as convinced as Petersson and Rothstein that Sweden differs that much from the USA concerning the major *trends*.

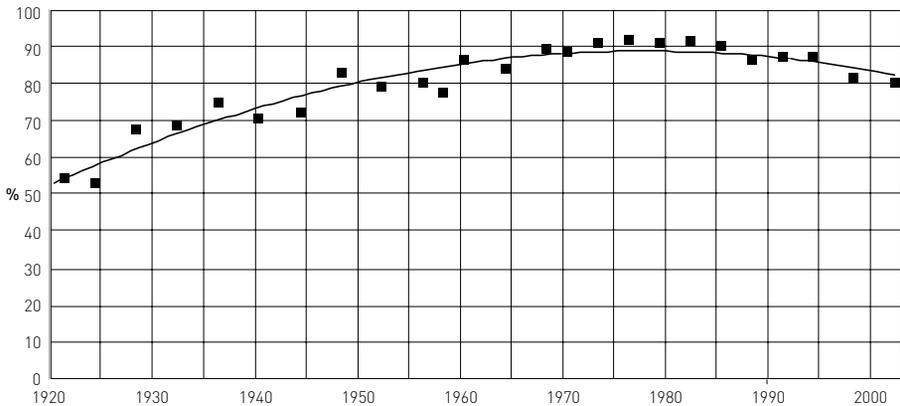
What differs is the time and the level from which the decline began.

Political Participation

We will start by examining civic engagement in terms of political participation. The parameters used by Putnam to measure this are *voter turnout*, *attendance at political meetings*, *interest in discussing political issues and newspaper readership*.

We find that the first parameter, voter turnout, shows a tendency similar to the American case. As illustrated in the diagram below, there is an obvious break in the trend at the beginning of the 80's. In the USA, the decline in the presidential elections, which started as far back as the early 60's, is now down below 50 per cent, which is lower than it has ever been in Sweden. But still, the *trend* is similar.

Voter turnout in Sweden 1921–2002

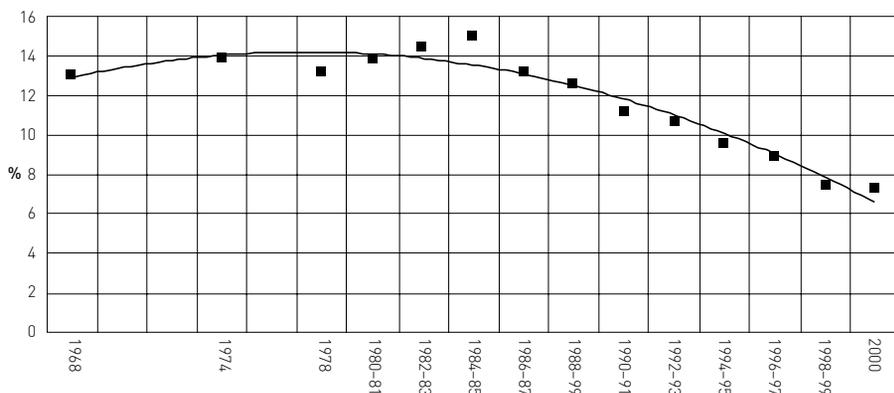


Source: SCB, Valstatistik 1921–2002

The same goes for *membership in political parties*, as shown in the next figure.

The number of those who have *access to a daily newspaper* in Sweden has decreased by 9.5 per cent in the period 1975–1995. In addition to the general trend, the curve slopes more steeply for the most deprived groups, for instance the low paid and poor. (SCB, *rapport 91*, 1997, diagram 12.7 p. 205 and översiktstabell, p. 213)

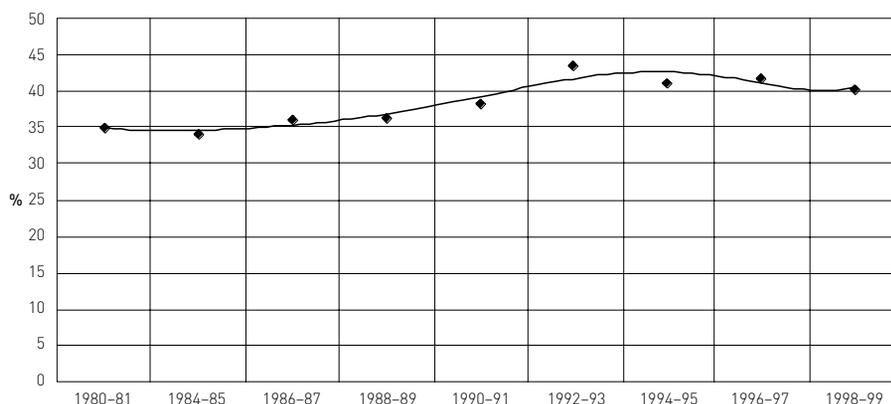
Member of a political party



Source: Levnadsnivåundersökningen 1968 och 1974 i Petersson, O., et al 1998 tab. 3.2;
 SCB Levnadsförhållanden, rapport 31, Politiska resurser 1978, tabell 2.2 och;
 SCB, Undersökningarna av levnadsförhållanden (ULF)

The exception to the trend of decreasing civic activity, measured as political activity, is the *interest in discussing political issues*. Those who often participate in political discussions have in fact increased in number over time. A closer look at the figures shows no obvious differences between men and women over time, but rather between generations. Those aged 45 or above have become more eager to discuss politics. This could indicate that there is a generational factor to be considered also in Sweden.

Often participate in political discussions



Source: SCB, Undersökningarna av levnadsförhållanden (ULF)

The inconsistency compared to the other parameters measuring political activity could reflect a growing sense of powerlessness, where increased discussion of political issues is elicited by the political changes.

On the other hand, investigations show that Swedes to a larger extent than before believe they can influence political decisions in many ways even if there are fewer that actually take any initiatives in that direction today. What is interesting is the way they think they can exercise influence. It is quite clear that there is a shift away from the traditional collective methods: by voting, by working in political parties and through trade unions. Instead, Swedes rely to a larger extent on personal contacts or other non-traditional ways of exercising influence, like gaining attention via the mass media. On the other hand, the traditional ways are by no means considered useless, and still rate higher than non-parliamentary means. (Petersson et al, 1998, p. 51–53)

We now turn away from the indicators of political activity and concentrate on the core of the Putnam thesis: the civic associations.

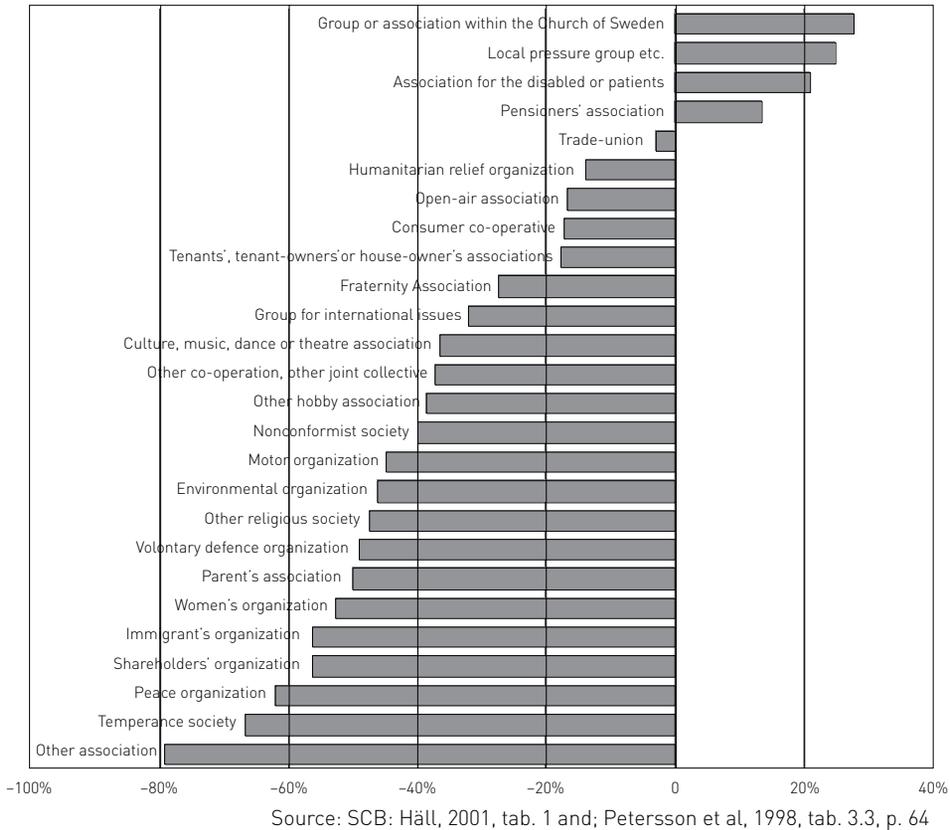
Civic Associations

At a very first glance the tendency concerning *membership in civic associations* is not as alarming as in the USA. Swedes still seem to be well organized (except for in political parties). The proportion of the population that are members in at least one organization has declined somewhat, from 94 % in 1987, to 92.2 % in 1992 and to 90.2 % in 2000. On the other hand, the differences in *levels of activity* over time have decreased more. In addition, both parameters (membership and activity levels) are strongly correlated to socio-economic variables. In *none* of the different types of civic associations is membership and especially active membership dominated by the working-class. Only the unions are fairly "equal" in that sense. Involvement in organized activities is undoubtedly to a certain degree a matter of class – or maybe one should say it is a matter *for* the *wealthy and the well educated*. (Petersson et al, 1998, p. 89)

Compared to the figures of 1987, present membership numbers in most types of associations have declined considerably: A quick comparison shows that membership has declined in 18 out of 26 comparable associations from 1987 to 2000 (see figure below).

Those who have increased in number are pensioners' organisations (+14 %), associations for the disabled and patients (+21 %), church related organisations (+28 %) and local action groups (+ 25 %). The ageing population combined

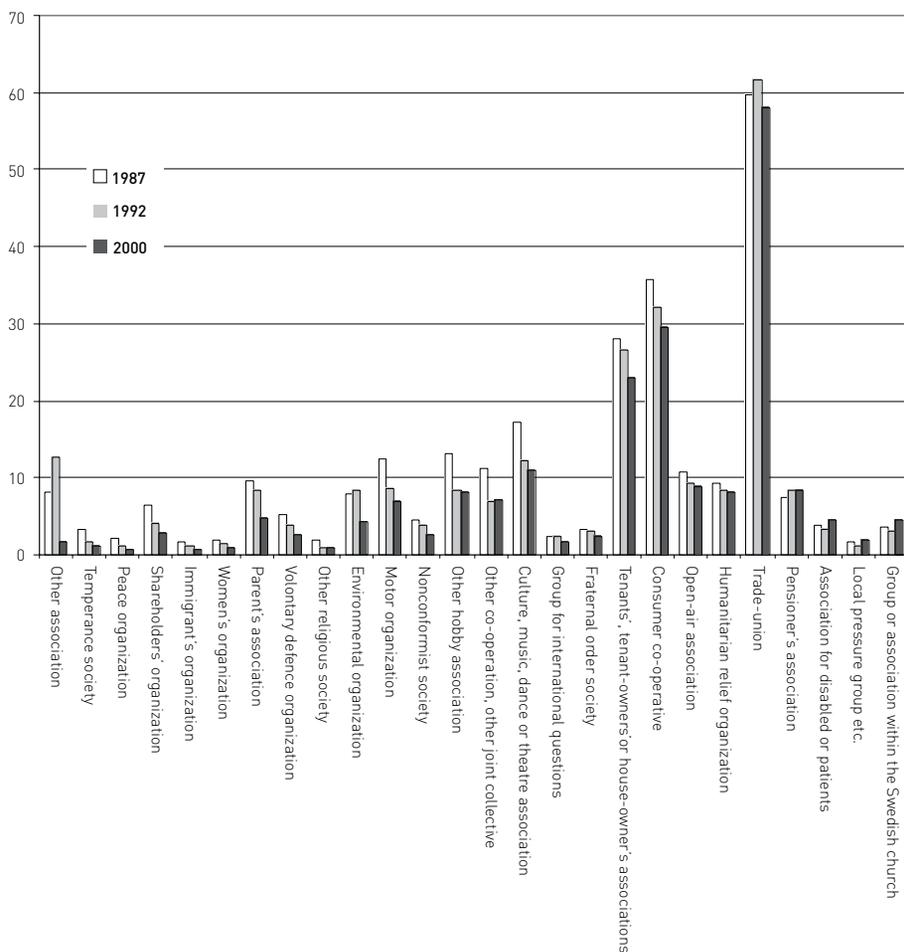
Relative changes in membership in different types of associations between 1987 and 2000



with the prolonged life expectancy and the improved health status among the elderly might partly explain this. They are also better off financially than their forebears, and they belong to the categories that have maintained their purchasing power during the economically troublesome 90's.

The rest of the organizations are losers in terms of membership. Out of the 26 organizations, 12 have lost more than 40 %. At the bottom we find women's associations (-53 %), immigrants associations (-56 %), temperance movements (-79 %) and peace movements (-62 %). Among those that have suffered a heavy loss of members we also find other types of associations based on ideological or altruistic issues, such as environmental associations, religious organizations (outside the Church of Sweden), parents' organizations and organizations for international issues, all of which have lost more than 40 % of their members.

Number of members in percentage of the adult population



Source: SCB, Häll, 2001, tab. 1 and; Petersson et al, 1998, tab. 3.3, p. 64

The relative size of the different associations is shown in the figure below. This does not alter the picture. There is an obvious overall decline in membership and the four types of organizations exhibiting a small increase in membership are quite small compared to the other ones.

Even more discouraging is the fact that also the *activity level* within each organization has decreased. From 1992 to 2000, the total number of members in any organizations has decreased by 11 percent and those active in any organization have become 21 percent fewer, meaning that the activity level has decreased even more rapidly than the membership level.

Based on these figures, it seems quite clear that civic traditions in Sweden are rapidly declining. This is also confirmed by a number of political scientists in a report published in 1998. They point to several alarming trends, threatening the basic democratic institutions, both official and unofficial. Membership and the level of activity in civic organizations are among those trends. (Petersson et al, 1998) It should be added that these trends are even more obvious today, four years after their report.

In an earlier project, in which two of the authors of the above-mentioned report participated, and which investigated power relations in Sweden in the 80's, the heading of the concluding chapter is "The Ambiguous Citizenship". (Petersson O., A. Westholm & G. Blomberg, 1989, chapter 11) This pinpoints the state of affairs in the 80's and can be seen as an expression of the tendencies in that decade, pointing in different directions at the same time. As we shall see, the 80's can now be considered the starting point of increasing inequality and decreasing civic activity.

Explaining civic traditions – a tentative hypothesis

So far I have only compared the Swedish development with that in America, as described by Putnam. I would now like to propose another, complementary hypothesis to the ones put forward by Putnam.

As Putnam himself argues, an extensive welfare state not only seems to be no obstacle to the formation of social capital. On the contrary, it favours it. This is also in accordance with the findings of many others (for instance Petersson and Rothstein above). But is it the welfare expenditure *per se* that is favorable or is it something else? I would argue that it is a certain outcome of the expenditure – namely the *relative economic equality* (if the expenditures are made in a way that creates equality), which is favorable to the formation of social capital and thereby also to economic performance.

The Swedish economist, Torsten Persson, and his Italian colleague, Guido Tabellini, investigated the correlation between the *rate of economic growth* and *equality of income distribution* over a long period of time (1930–1985). The investigation included nine countries. Their result shows a statistically significant correlation of such magnitude that a typical deviation from the standard degree of equality implies a difference in annual growth of a little bit more than 0.5 per cent over a period of 25 years, which would result in a difference in GNI per head of approximately 13 per cent, which is a considerable figure.

Of course this applies when several other factors that also have an influence on economic growth have been accounted for. (Persson, 1996)²

In Sweden, a substantial part of the state revenue is spent as transfers between different categories in society. Families with children receive an extra income benefit per child, until the age of 15 (or more under certain circumstances). Medical care is practically free, as is education. Sickness benefits are financed to a great extent by public means. Unemployment benefits are financed in equal parts by the union's unemployment benefit funds and the state.

These are just some examples of transfers which all have the same effect: a considerable levelling of incomes. When you are young, old or sick, when you have children, when you study and when you are unemployed – the rest of the working population supports you. This system is also strongly supported by a majority of citizens, including a substantial proportion of the middle classes, as shown in a number of surveys. Also, the broader the bases of those who benefit from the system, the greater are the chances of winning an election on a program advocating a strong general welfare state. What might seem a paradox is that the more extensive the social and security system is the more will be left over for the poor. (SCB *Rapport nr 91*, 1997, p. 650) The explanation of why this system gains such strong support among people is that all citizens are entitled to it, regardless of income.

But there has been a trend away from the general welfare system for some decades now. Fees have been introduced; the level of benefits has decreased; qualifying periods have been introduced, etc.

These and other changes, mainly in labour market relations dating from the beginning of the 80's, have resulted in growing income gaps and a more unequal society (but still Sweden, together with the other Nordic countries, is one of the most equal societies in the European Union and probably in the world (SCB, *Rapport nr 91*, 1997, p. 159–62)).

Given the scope of this article, it is not possible to pin down the exact causes of the shift towards growing inequality, but it has at least partly to do with the conscious change in economic policies that gradually took place in the 80's, strongly advocated by the Swedish employers' associations, the Conservative and Liberal parties, but also by a large part of the Social Democratic elite, especially those affiliated with the Ministry of Finance. Monetarism à la Milton

2 A more complete presentation of the project is made in *American Economic Review*, vol 84, no 3, p. 600–621.

Friedman and Friedrich Hayek is now the prevailing economic doctrine (also) in Sweden, given the emphasis on price stability instead of full employment and the independent role of the Central Bank instead of an active state-managed economic policy. Also a systematic and conscious cutback and dismantling of the public sphere took place (and is still taking place). A number of sectors formerly owned or regulated by central and local governments were privatised and/or deregulated, such as the postal services, telecommunications, electricity distribution, public transportation, the school system, health care, housing, forestry, agriculture etc.³ The centrally coordinated and detailed wage negotiations at national level have been abandoned and replaced by negotiations at a local and individual level.

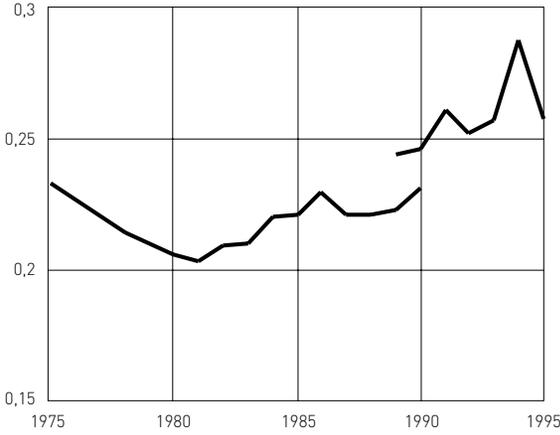
This, I argue, has had adverse effects on income distribution, as well as on working conditions, not the least in the public sector, for women (to a large extent employed in the public sector), indirectly for children, the sick and disabled, the unemployed and immigrants (except for immigrants from Northern and Western Europe).

This is how the situation is described in the official report on welfare and inequality 1975–1995:

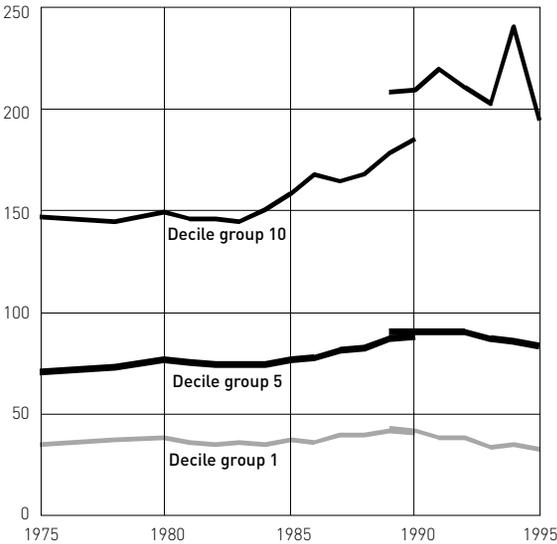
Disposable income has increased by ca 18 per cent since the mid-70's, reckoned per consumption unit after taxes and transfers. The most significant improvement occurred during 1985–90. Most of the increase since the 70's can be attributed to a sharp rise in employment among women, not to growth in real incomes. Real earned incomes for full-time employees have increased only slightly since 1975 (plus three per cent in constant money value). Without the increases in female employment, there would have been no increase in incomes. One implication is that the recorded rise in incomes was concentrated largely to joint households, particularly among the middle cohorts (30–64 years) and childless households. *Inequality in the distribution of income declined steadily until the start of the 80's, but has again begun to increase since then* [author's italics]. Inequality is measured with so-called Gini coefficients, where lower values indicate lower inequality (cf. Graph 1). The shift in trend during the 80's was due primarily to rapid growth of the highest incomes (Graph 2). During the 90's, the lowest incomes declined, and the proportion living in poverty increased. (SCB, *Rapport nr 91*, 1997, p. 630)

3 Ironically the Swedish agricultural sector was extensively deregulated just before Sweden became a member of the European Union, and thereby the sector became more regulated than ever before, but on different grounds. Other sectors have been forcefully deregulated as a result of the EU-membership, like the formerly restrictive alcohol policy. Laws and regulations aimed at protecting children from TV-commercials, from dangerous toys, to prevent diseases from spreading etc. have also had to be abolished or weakened, a lot of them since they have been claimed to be an obstacle to the free market.

Graph 1. Inequality of disposable household income /consumption unit 1983–1995. Gini-coefficients⁴



Graph 2. Disposable household income per consumer unit, by decile⁵ groups in thousands, 1995 prices. SEK/year



4 The Gini-coefficient indicates the ratio between the real distribution of income and a situation in which the distribution is completely equal. The Gini-coefficient can assume values from 0 to 1. The closer to 1, the coefficient is, the more unequal the distribution of income is.

5 A decile group is a tenth of the population. Decile group 1 is the 10 per cent of the population with the lowest incomes and decile group 10 the 10 percent with the highest incomes.

The report also shows us that young people and single parents have experienced the lowest increases in disposable incomes. What is interesting is that women's entrance on the labour market explains the improvement in incomes in the 80's to such an extent. It would be as interesting to know what caused women to seek employment. Could one part of the explanation be an attempt to maintain the living standard of the family? And what effect has it had in terms of the burden of work, paid and unpaid, especially for women? Is this maybe one of the reasons why the amount of sick leave has increased so much lately (see below)?

There has also been a clear increase in *poverty* in the first half of the 90's. Poverty has affected young people, single persons without full-time employment, cohabiting couples of whom at least one is unemployed, blue-collar workers, disability pensioners and families with children – especially families with single parents, families with numerous children, and young parents with small children.

One of the most worrying tendencies is the rapidly *deteriorating conditions for immigrants*. In the table below, this is illustrated in terms of unemployment for different categories. Non-European immigrants are much worse off compared to the other groups, especially in the 90's. Nordic immigrants, on the other hand, are hardly affected at all, compared to native Swedes. This might of course coincide with the fact that the Nordic immigrants (mainly from Finland) arrived earlier, not as political refugees but as labour immigrants at a time (in the 50's and 60's) when there was a severe labour shortage in Sweden. In the 90's, the situation was the opposite, and unemployment figures peaked at levels not experienced since the depression of the 30's. In the final decades of the 20th century, the labour market has also undergone a transformation, away from manual routine work in industry to other types of work, often in the public sector and requiring other types of education and skills. On the other hand, education does not seem to matter. As a matter of fact, the best-educated groups among immigrants are the ones currently suffering most from unemployment. Of course, there are many complicating elements such as language requirements, type of education, time of arrival etc., which are not possible to consider in this paper.

Whatever the *reasons* for the increasing difficulties for immigrants are, we can notice that the changes probably took place in the late 80's or the early 90's. Of course, the high unemployment rates among immigrants have also had a negative bearing on poverty, segregation in housing and, thereby, also in

Unemployment for various different ethnic and educational categories 1975–2000

	Percentage gainfully employed				Average length of education, years	Poorly educated	Pre-secondary education	Short secondary education (0-2 years)	Secondary education (more than 2 years)	Post-secondary education (less than 3 years)	College/ university education (3 years or more)
	1975-78	1984-87	1992-95	1993-00								1995
All	77.4	80.7	75.2		11.3	8.4	29	33	12	15.5	10.4
Native Swedes	..	..	..	73	..	..	..	..	..	..	..
All those born abroad	76.1	77.5	63.2	54	11.5	10.3	30	25.7	16.8	15	12.5
Born in Nordic countries (exc. Sw.)	77.4	81.8	73.9	67	10.9	14	32.9	35.9	11.6	10.9	8.7
Born in other European countries	77.9	77.7	65.2	..	12.2	9.2	23.5	21.8	18.9	19	16.7
Born in the rest of the world	..	60.9	47.1	..	11.7	6.2	33.1	15.2	22.1	16.2	13.3
Immigrated before the age of 7	70.8	78.3	64.3	..	12.3	3.5	28	33.5	13.2	17.2	8.1
Immigrated at adult age	79.1	76.9	61.8	..	11.6	11.9	28.3	21.8	18.7	15.5	15.6
Lived in Sweden maximum 9 years	70.3	67.8	45.5	..	12.4	4	25.6	15	24	17.4	17.8
Lived in Sweden minimum 10 years	79.8	80.8	70.6	..	11.2	12.7	31.6	29.7	14.1	14.1	10.5
Minimum one parent born abroad	77.3	74.6	70.1	..	12.2	4.1	23.2	35.6	11.7	18.9	10.7
Both parents born in Sweden	78.4	81.6	77.5	..	11.2	8.5	29.2	34	11.4	15.3	10.1
Standard deviation	4.3	5.0	11.0								

Source: SCB Rapport 91, Översiktstabell: Sysselsättningsförhållanden, 1997

schools, etc., especially in combination with the above mentioned deregulations, privatisations of and cut downs in the public sector.

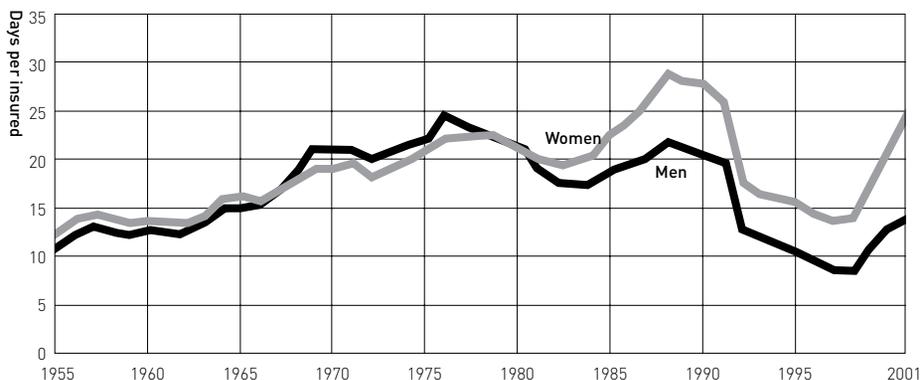
That *income distribution* also has an influence on *political activity* is hard to deny. There is a positive statistical correlation between electoral participation and income level, as well as between electoral participation and employment rate. The higher your income is, the more likely it is that you will cast your vote on Election Day. A tentative comparison between electoral behaviour and average income levels on the primary municipal level shows a correlation of 0.5 (rang). (National election of 1998 and income levels of 2000. SCB) On the contrary – if your income is low or if you are unemployed, you are less likely exert your right to vote.

Finally, some words about women and equality that qualify the question of income as a measure of equality. Strictly economically speaking, the wage gap between men and women has not increased that much during the period. On the other hand, income differences on an aggregated level are a somewhat blunt instrument. Women's incomes are dependent to a high degree on which sector they are employed in. An overall tendency is that wages in the public sector have declined compared to the private sector, especially for those employed by the local governments. This is also where most women are employed, mainly in education and nursing.

What is important to consider in a comparison between the sexes is the total burden of work and the dramatic increase in long-term sick leave, presently a very urgent issue in Swedish politics.

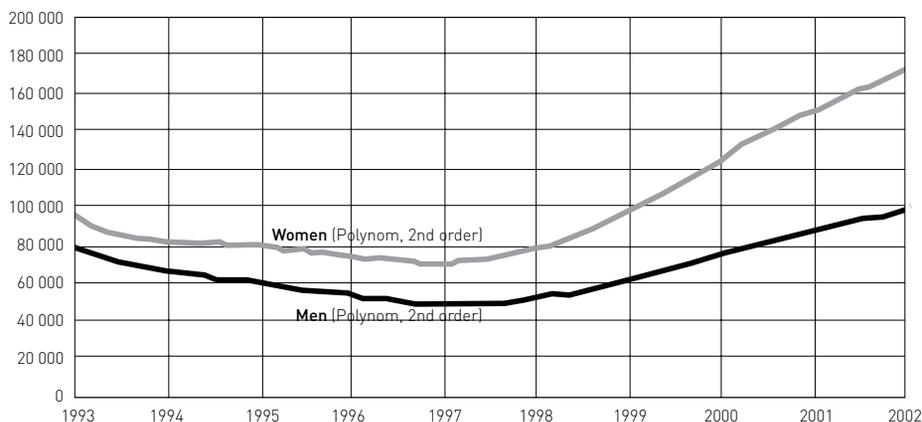
In the first figure below, it is obvious that the gap in periods of sick leave between men and women appeared and widened in the 80's but that the total number of sick leave days has grown during the whole period. Both the increase and the sudden drop in the 90's can probably be explained to some extent by changes in the regulations surrounding health insurance and maybe also directly and indirectly by the sudden increase in unemployment, but it certainly does not explain the differences between men and women. In the second figure, we can see how the gap between men and women on sick leave longer than 30 days is also widening. In this case also the gap appears in the 80's.

Days of sick leaves 1955–2001



Source: Riksförsäkringsverket, Ordinarie årsstatistik 1957–2001

Number of individuals on sickleaves for more than 30 days



Source: Riksförsäkringsverket, Månadsstatistik för sjukförmåner 1993–2002

Conclusions and suggestions for further study

To summarize, there are several indicators (growing gaps in income distribution, poverty, unemployment and health) indicating growing economic and social inequalities in Swedish society from the beginning or middle of the 80's and onwards. These growing inequalities seem to coincide in time with declining civic activity, at least those indicators used by Robert Putnam. This implies that there might also be a *causal* connection between equality and civic activity, as I formulated it in the introduction. If this is the case, it would also

be possible to state that some of the HR are more basic than others, or that material conditions and the distribution of them are crucial to the exercise of democratic rights in a wider sense of the concept. To prove this would of course take a much more thorough investigation.

I suggest that further study should also include the *historical* aspects. By investigating the economic development in Sweden from the 19th century and onwards, including the preconditions for both the agrarian and the industrial revolutions as well as the further development of the 20th century, I believe it would be possible to further qualify the argument put forward in this article. There are obvious connections between the relative economic equality among the rural and early industrial population of 19th-century Sweden and the rapid industrialization of the country. Directly related to this development and by many scholars considered to be an important and functional part of it, are the popular civic movements of the late 19th century. These movements continuously pushed for democratic and social reforms, and eventually merged into a symbiosis with the state and capital, resulting in the profit and welfare-maximizing machine it was considered to be, especially in the 1950's and 1960's.

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