

Anförande

Exploring Blind Spots

*Inledningsanförande vid Nordiska sociologförbundets
27:e konferens 14–16 augusti 2014*

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Welcome to the 27th Nordic Sociological Association bi-annual meeting. It is a bit strange that I stand here before you today instead of Christofer Edling who is the present president of the Nordic Sociological Association. But as he was unable to participate today, Christofer asked me to replace him & say a few words to you in relation to the conference theme. I was asked because of an earlier experience of opening a Nordic conference. Some of you may remember that I was the president of the NSA when the NSA conference “Transformations, Boundaries and Dialogues” was held in Malmö 10 years ago. But I’m also standing here because I am affiliated to the Department of Sociology in Lund which hosts the conference.

I am honored but also feel that it is a bit awkward to do so in that I have not participated in the preparatory work for this conference. As many of you know, it does take a lot of work to prepare an international conference. So first of all, I want to thank you, the organizational committee, for all the work you put into preparing for this conference. Secondly, I wish to welcome all of you (& also those not present here but who will participate at the conference later).

But let me offer a few reflections on the conference theme: EXPLORING BLIND SPOTS, which apparently was already discussed at the meetings on Iceland as a possible theme for a future NSA conference.

To prepare myself I did a google search on the internet. A blind spot is an obscuration of the visual field. This is something rather well-known but I assume that most of us do not know its exact size and location. I have a picture and a description of size and location in front of me – but I have to admit that the description does not make sense to me. That makes it difficult information to share, so let me continue with information that is important for this talk. Blind spots are not stationary. You can do a test where you see things – letters in the text I read – dependent on whether you move your eye towards or away from the screen, you can also look with only one instead of two eyes & so on. When you do this test, letters disappear depending on your movement. This seems to make clear that *a way of seeing* as John Berger so nicely put it becomes a way of NOT seeing –

when making small movements and/or position yourself differently you see - and thus also don't see - different things.

It is this - movement and positioning – that I'd like to apply to sociology. So let me start by positioning myself - I define myself as a critical sociologist. This means that I place myself within a tradition consisting of a broad range of approaches: such as Marxist, feminist, Frankfurt school, cultural studies, poststructuralist and postcolonial approaches. But I am also a sociologist who sees sociology as part of society and assumes that working together and dialoguing with others – in other academic disciplines and fields as well as with people, groups and organisations outside of academia (those we sometimes refer to as our public). The latter would suggest that I can be placed in public sociology which again has a long tradition in sociology but which has been brought to the fore of our thinking about the discipline over the last decade through the writings of today's keynote speaker, Michael Burroway. But what's important here is that my positioning means that I may see things others may or do not see, and vice versa – as our positioning and movements open ways of seeing but also limit what we see.

The following example can illustrate this point: If you are studying schooling from a Marxist perspective you see certain things and miss others. If you are studying schooling from an interactionist perspective you focus on certain things and exclude - or do not see - others. One thus creates blind spots in the knowledge produced through the choice of a particular theoretical framework. The same happens when you choose particular research methods. When the many different perspectives, theories, methods within the discipline are taken together, however, I would argue some of some of these blind spots disappear. My argument here is as follows: Sociology is a broad discipline - covering many different perspectives, theories, research methods and also a plethora of topics and areas. The many different topics are in addition studied by sociologists who position themselves in different sociological traditions and make use of many different methods and theories. This would indicate that there are few or no blind spots in the discipline.

But it is here also that a problem emerges. Professionalism dominates in sociology today – this goes for the Nordic countries - where especially in Sweden sociology was closely connected to the welfare state and more policy oriented – as well as for sociology in other parts of Europe and the rest of the world. Professional sociology can be characterized through divisions into areas of competence, specialization, boundaries between different research areas, qualifications and norms about what counts as good science – and where scientific knowledge is separated from other forms of knowledge in particular that which is labeled “political”. The predominance of this view does create blind spots due to the inability of representatives of different types of sociology, different theoretical and methodological positions, to communicate with each other. (In parenthesis: I'm not saying that this is something specific for sociology - professionalization characterizes academia in general.) These blind spots might disappear or at least diminish if sociologists representing different theoretical frameworks, methods and areas of study talk with each other. This however - I would argue - is NOT often

the case. Sociology as a field has become more professionalized and fragmented and sociologists often mainly talk with, write for, other sociologists with similar interests, similar positioning etc. My answer here is twofold: a call for sociologists to critically reflect on their own practices and greater exchange and more discussion between representatives for different types of sociologies. This is not a new suggestion, I'm sure you've read Bourdieu's call for a reflexive sociology and it's impossible for a sociologist to not have read Weber's *The Protestant Ethics*. I interpret the last sentence in Weber's book where he writes: This is ONE interpretation but there are other possible interpretations as an invitation for such a discussion. This suggests an open attitude, reflections and exchanges – where we also can allow ourselves to disagree with each other. Again there are many examples of such exchanges – those that come to my mind are discussions between Foucault and Habermas in the early 1980s and between Butler and Fraser a few decades later. I'm sure you can come up with own examples that can inspire further discussion and thus also may contribute to a disappearance of some of sociology's blind spots.

In addition, sociology changes historically – which is something that seems almost “natural” as sociology is about society. But there are changes in focus and priorities made that see to it that certain questions are emphasized and others disappear. Some of this may be related to the rise and fall of theoretical traditions and political ideologies. One such question which was of central importance to sociologists is the question of work, labor relations, systems of inequality and connected themes of marginalization and discrimination.

During the 1980s for example, many of us were studying changes in the labor market by focusing on unemployment, temporary employment, flexible forms of labor contracts etc. Today, it appears that this area is underdeveloped or at least receives less attention in Swedish – and Nordic - sociology. When I say labor market I do not use its traditional meaning – referring to workplaces, organizations in the public sphere – but also include social institutions such as households and families – which in sociology earlier were placed in a private sphere.

So the area I would like to bring back into sociologists' eyesight concerns work and labor relations – locally & globally and more specifically the roles played by gender, race/ethnicity and class in these social relations. Let me give two themes here that I think are of particular importance. *The creation of flexible work and a flexible labor force and The creation of a new underclass.*

In relation to the first theme: The creation of flexible work and a flexible labor force. A few months ago – railway workers in Southern Sweden went out on strike. The reason given was that the internal company that owns the trains, Veolia, wished to change the fulltime, permanent jobs of the majority of the train attendants and of half of the train drivers into part time employment. That the striking workers received support from other unions and “the general public” (despite all the difficulties this meant in terms of travel) is important but I wish to focus my attention on the changing conditions of ownership and of working conditions. The latter are part of larger processes including globalization and deregulation which have impacted wor-

king conditions. In earlier decades, the use of flexibility and its relation to large scale processes of change would have been a central research area for sociology, particularly in Sweden which has a long tradition of work-related research. While there are, of course, some sociologists who study flexibility and working conditions, I would like to see more research on this theme.

In relation to the second theme: The creation of an underclass. Many of us – in particular in Sweden – have become acquainted with people begging outside of food stores and shopping areas. Many of those who are begging are Roma and we can read in the newspapers about the impossibility for Roma to get paid employment. But the difficulty to find work is not limited to them - other groups have a similar experience. There are those who find themselves working for a few hours and on short term contracts. Immigrants and so-called illegals have special difficulties finding employment with any regularity or security. The use of day laborers – which we found existed in Malmö when we carried out a study on unemployment in the mid- 1980s – is more common today. One can also point to women who work as nannies. Often nannies come from other parts of Europe and/or the world, they receive low pay and are often not protected through labor regulations. Young people entering the labor market for the first time are another example. This underclass then is quite diverse and consists of many different groups. So my suggestion is that we need to give more attention to the different mechanisms that contribute to different groups' movements in informal and formal labor markets. In particular, we need to study individuals and groups that fall outside of regulated labor markets, and sometimes also outside of societies, at local, national and global levels within a framework where attention is given to social, economic and political processes at macro levels.

A third theme, which is connected to – and also an exemplification of – the other two, is more specific and closer to home: *namely the working conditions at universities*. My first thought when thinking about blind spots was about the content of sociology and our study object compared to other disciplines and fields of study. But like many other people, sociologists work in workplaces - but we study other workplaces and not our own. At the university we are highly educated professionals who are surrounded by groups of people that make our work possible – such as cleaners, caretakers, secretaries, computer specialists. What about the conditions of these people? Do similar processes of flexibility and the presence of an underclass apply to the university as a workplace? Studies of the working conditions of universities are far and few between. Thus we do not know what the conditions for some of the workers are. One positive example here is a study about the abysmal conditions of workers at The University of California, Berkeley – entitled *Berkeley's Betrayal about wages and working conditions at CAL* which came out about 10 years ago. The authors of the report show amongst others that many worked for insufficient wages and under unfair leadership practices. An important point made in the report is also that the workers were not given access to opportunities for own learning and development. The study may not apply to academic institutions in the Nordic countries but we may wish to study our own institutions/work places here as well. And to bring it even closer to home: What are the

conditions for sociologists – and in particular the younger generation and temporary employed - today? We seem to experience and “know it” on a day to day basis, but why not study these conditions? This may be one of the blind spots in our very own midst.

With these reflections on blind spots based in assumptions about our movements and positioning in sociology I wish to open up for further reflection and discussion. I am sure this conference will provide us with many opportunities to discover and overcome some of the blind spots in our discipline.

Thank you!