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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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What part does the story of the past play in the struggle for the future? The construction of the Swedish nation in the 20th century in school history books

*Roger Johansson and Lars Berggren
Malmö University (Sweden)*

Introduction

On 14th May 1931 in the small northern Swedish town of Ådalen there was a peaceful demonstration against strike-breakers. A military troop opened fire, killing five people and wounding several others. Some of the largest demonstrations ever seen in Sweden followed this. The event also marked a political swing in society, a change from conflict to what came to be known as 'the Swedish model', and the events in Ådalen that day are some of the most famous in contemporary Swedish history. Every country has events with great symbolic significance. For the Swedish labour movement, and for Swedish history as a whole, the conflict in Ådalen in 1931 was a decisive event. As has been shown recently (Johansson, 2001), what happened in Ådalen has since become known as the Ådalen-image of official history and is characterised by heavy symbolism: historian Reinhart Koselleck (Koselleck, 1985) suggests it might even be regarded as a concept.

Images of current social values are carried, and most obviously expressed, in the history books of the compulsory school. This is where social history written and copied under supervision. We thought that from a didactic point of view it would be of great interest to see whether the events in Ådalen are mentioned in the textbooks used in compulsory school, and if so how those events are presented, and in which context. From there, underlying questions about why the events are presented at all and in what way would be posed. Both textbooks and teaching aids were central objects of our studies, as they provide some of the greatest examples of the institutionalised production of history in our country.

History as textbooks

The struggles of the past (or what is thought of as the past) have been more consciously considered in both school and society in the 20th century than previously. History teaching reflects contemporary values about society within education and values about the past, which also is '...of great importance to the contemporary course of events' (Andersson, 1979, pp 270, 279).

In school education, at least in the subject of history, current values are made be explicit. The compulsory school is where the description of the (imaginary) past is clarified and the ruling imagination of society is expressed. Compulsory schools textbooks are the most obvious expression of a coherent history of society, an image of the past and the values that current society wishes to disseminated under supervision. A study how the history textbooks portray Ådalen and the birth of the peoples' home will tell us something about the ruling values of the time when each textbook was edited.

The Norwegian textbook author Egil Johnsen suggests a definition of what is so specific about the textbook, when he is trying to explain the great influence it has in giving structure to our opinion about the world:

This is a free-passenger of the people's enlightening that is placed somewhere between society and home, between science and propaganda, between trade unions and employers and between adults and children (Johnsen, 1992).

Other researchers also point to the function of the textbook as an officially sanctioned educational text with a revealed moral influence. Staffan Selander suggests '...the text is characterised...by knowledge and moral being woven together in a way which has official sanction but often isn't obvious but revealed within'. The text has a wider purpose as it is '...produced for a special institutionalised purpose ...' (Selander, 1988, p 17).

Textbooks as an expression of society's understanding of itself

Let us assume that the choice of facts in textbooks used in compulsory school not only express the history the writers want to present, but something far more - that history which 'stays on', rather like an expression of our collective understanding of our own age and ourselves. Why do we choose to tell the history we do? Is it because history that still lives functions as a key to the explanation of our own age?

Reinhart Koselleck connects his research of *Begriffsgeschichte* to the past, present and future, asserting that events of great influence will become historic concepts. We argue that 'Ådalen 1931' is a concept in this particular way. According to Koselleck, the ability of the concept to influence the present means that the content of the concept do not change with changes in the political situation: conflicts about concepts reflect deeper social conflicts (Kostelleck, 1985, pp 77, 271).

What is of interest is that while images created collaboratively in the present produce both historic experience and expectations of the future that are empirical, tangible and testable, at another level they must be looked upon as an expression of social conflict. Thus the descriptions in textbooks of the events in Ådalen and the birth of the People's Home also constitute an expression of deeper social opposites about the context. Starting from the context, the descriptions of the conflict allow the empirical study of the changes the contexts undergo. One way to observe changes is to see if the events are mentioned or not: the omission of an event in a history text is a very clear indication.

The historian is dealing with his own time, as well as the events of the past and his thoughts about the future when he writes: do people do the same when they write their individual or collective histories? (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, p 201). Professor Eva Österberg talks about history as our collective memory, as well as our ability to collectively forget (Österberg, 1996, p 7). Both remembering and forgetting contain many collectives, and these states are not static (Carr, 1996, p 52; Burke 1989, p 106). Ronald Aminzade shows in his studies of French society that there can be many different histories at the same time, which can converge, disappear and appear again (Aminzade, 1993, p 4).

The school curriculum as an influence on textbooks

Textbooks have been analysed in many ways and on many levels. One would be to relate the intentions of teaching about the political to curriculum and syllabi: but there is little connection between the history found in text books and the aims given in the curriculum. Several researchers have shown that there are fewer differences between textbooks than there are between the curricula from 1955, 1962, 1969, 1980 and 1994, which are the periods our choice of textbooks covers. (Selander, 1988; Truedsson, 1993). This is

supported in politics dealing with education (Englund, 1996). The textbook writers are children of their time, and contemporary values, political and social conflicts are reflected both in textbooks and in the curriculum.

Some other perspectives of what is ruling historic presentation and values in textbooks

Svend Sødning-Jensen based his successful analysis of history teaching in Western Europe during the 20th century on Wolfgang Klafki's thesis. He found that a great deal of the teaching of history in Western Europe after 1945 could be described as objective: characterised by teaching based on facts unproblematically transferred to students (Sødning-Jensen, 1978, pp 54, 57). This is a quantitative and cumulative view of knowledge, which is seen as the neutral transfer of value-free knowledge. However, Sødning-Jensen points out that there is a hidden influence, because a collection of objective facts can hide possible explanations of historic events and thus make history impossible to understand - no writer of history can possibly stay neutral towards his own ideas and will reveal his own values, however much he ever tries to conceal them (Sødning-Jensen, 1978, pp 23, 39; Klafki, 1963; Karlsson, 1987, pp 135–146).

The chronology, or 'tillrettelæggelse af undervisningen', as Jensen puts it, forms a cement that keeps the history together - something which it may be thought should be done, from theoretical considerations about the aims and purpose of history writing (Sødning-Jensen, 1978, p 43). Another significance of 'objective' history writing is that the presentation originates from a social-partner theory in which 'we are all in the same boat' and class struggles belong to the old days and are out of date. We believe that Sødning-Jensen's theory is convincing, and that in the main the textbooks used after 1945 are very similar both between themselves and over time, offering a lack of other historical explanations, chronology as a uniting structure and present a social-partner theory.

From Koselleck's conceptions of history, the events in Ådalen 1931 and the People's Home would be used as explanatory concepts and as keys to possible the interpretation of Swedish contemporary history.

The 1930s are created

Three themes emerge from the way writers put the events in Ådalen into context and indicate the role of these events in the social development of the inter-war period.

- workers and employers; a theme that explains how the working class achieved a place in society through reforms and stability, cemented by the Saltsjöbads-agreement in 1938 (Bergström, 1979; Bergman & Öhman, 1983; Öhman, 1989);
- the development from crises and conflict in the beginning of the 1930s, exemplified in Sweden's way of avoiding both Nazism and Communism;
- the democratisation and increased effectiveness of Swedish society; behind which is another theme – 'Towards Modern Sweden'.

When Bo Stråth in 1997 describes the evolution of Sweden from 1930 to the late 1960s in the following extract, he describes history backwards, starting from his own time and discourse:

To legitimate the economic politics during the 1960s they took the mass unemployment in the 30s as a starting point. What became common thoughts during the 60s were said to have been so even during the time for the world depression. The 30s were created during the 60s as a straight line, beginning from the point where an economic crisis had been found for the last time. (...) The 60s years of Bonanza were the peak of a long rebuilding-boom, that lost its intensity when everything was back in order after the war, but the peak was regarded as a guarantee for future safety (Stråth, 1998).

Stråth's purpose is to show to what extent our writing of history is dependent on the discourse we take part in when we write it. In this situation discourse could be seen as a social text (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 1994, pp 79, 281) - it could as well be said that the crises within 'the Swedish model' at the end of the 60s created a growing need for legitimising the model.

The welfare as social harmony and national identity

To dig deeper into schoolbook texts new questions must be put: how are the links between the crises in 1930, Ådalen 1931 and the Social Democrats' achievement of the government in 1932 described?

A larger history from the different textbooks written between 1945 and today would describe this as the 30s beginning with a deep economic crisis and an extensive unemployment, in a Sweden that still was a class based society with deep social injustice. Needs and inequalities created situations such as that in Ådalen, where strike-breakers were assaulted and the military shot down peaceful, unarmed workers. Ådalen provoked strong reactions from different strata of society, as a result of which Per Albin Hansson and the Social Democrats won the election in 1932. The social tensions of Swedish society decreased though horse-trading, creating a broader political platform for the government. Cooperation replaced confrontation between the different political blocks. The outcome was a stable government, able to create social reforms, social peace and responsibility (Nyman, 1947, p 13). Together with programmes for house-building, day nursery, pensions, schools, mother-care, and the vacation, and with modern technology, these brought Sweden into the modern age. The government simply was marched in step with the age.

The Swedish People's Home was exported. In many textbooks there are claims that the way Sweden solved the crises and the social antagonism in society over time, became a model to many other countries. The rest of the world associated Sweden with the Social Democratic Party's politics of the People's Home as a vital part of our national identity.

The central part given to Ådalen in different reports can thus be explained as a pedagogic and historic example that shows what Sweden was like before the era of the People's Home.

Friedrich Nietzsche's view of the use of history - as antiquarian, monumental or critical - (Nietzsche, 1998) could be used to explain this picture of history. Is Ådalen presented as a warning example of historic construction that was discovered in the late 1960s?

Ådalen 1931 in history writing – seen through the compulsory school's textbooks

Different textbook-writers have different ambitions: only interrogating the writers would reveal this. But this is not the object of this study.

The larger history is on one hand part of a political construction in which Ådalen and the establishment of the People's Home become social concepts – part of a synthesis and antithesis of safety, work, unity and justice. On the other hand, both Ådalen and the People's Home become part of a national Swedish identity, which is linked to Per Albin and the Social Democrats. This national identity is not only addressed to the rest of the world, but is perhaps to an even greater extent about Swedish national self-understanding.

Koselleck's discussion about *Begriffsgeschichte* is thus a useful way of interpreting textbooks' use of Ådalen and the People's Home as concepts. It is also a fruitful way of examining those events which have had great influence as historical concepts, and which derive their meaning from social and political struggle. This is why Ådalen is mentioned in every textbooks except one after 1969, but not in any earlier books. Concepts in this sense are socially explosive (Koselleck, 1985, pp 77–85). Ådalen - due to the role the events have been ascribed in the construction of the society in the inter-war period - is such a concept.

How is the interpretation of the Ådalen-image retold? James Fentress and Chris Wickham have shown that collective memory is central to our understanding of the world in a political sense. Every social conflict then turns out to be a conflict of how to define the collective memory. 'Memory has an immense social role. It tells us who we are' (Fentress & Wickham, 1992, pp 114 f, 201). Ronald Aminzade, in his studies in what has formed French society, wanted to see how the pictures of everyday life make us act according to our different political experiences. When people are presented with new political problems they will look to history to help them understand the future (Aminzade, 1993, pp 23, 259 f.). Ådalen in this sense is not only a social identification and understanding but also in a wider concept a part of our national identity, according to our textbooks.

Peter Burke puts the question from an existential point of view: why can history create such strong feelings and why is it continuously rewritten? He gives an answer:

It is often said that history is written by the victors; it might also be said that history is forgotten by the victors. They can afford to forget, while the losers are unable to accept what happened and are condemned to brood over it, relive it, and reflect how different it might have been. Another explanation might be given in terms of cultural roots. When you have them you can afford to take them for granted, but when you lose them you search for them (Burke, 1989, p 106).

If Ådalen is hardly mentioned at all in the textbooks of before 1960, then after 1970 the events have served as an image of the antithesis of security. In that sense our interpretation of the Swedish 1930s as a time of change has been made possible and the importance of the politics of Social Democracy in the modernisation of Sweden have been underlined. The shifting meaning that the textbooks have given to the events in Ådalen for the shaping of the social welfare state indicate that Ådalen in the textbooks can be considered a concept in Koselleck's sense - and that the history writing of the concept of Ådalen is not final.

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