

Svante Beckman and Sten Månsson (ed.): *Kultursverige 2009 - Problemanalys och Kulturstatistik*, Linköping: Sörlins Förlag, 2008.

Review by Arne Ruth

According to recent European statistics, Swedish cultural policy has succeeded remarkably well in achieving its original objective: to promote popular interest in the Arts. Sweden (closely followed by our Nordic neighbors) tops the list when it comes to participation in cultural activities. The figures are included in a body of statistics that, together with commentary by Sten Månsson of the Swedish Cultural Council, make up the greater part of *Kultursverige 2009*.

To the uninitiated reader the tables seem a wonder of systematic comparative knowledge. But in his introductory essay Månsson expresses some serious caveats about the current state of cultural statistics. For one thing, they only register factors relating to the objects of public support, and even within that limitation, the picture is increasingly spotty. The statisticians at the Cultural Council have lost ground in the internal battle for resources.

Månsson describes an increasing destitution with laconic irony: "The turn of the millennium and new leadership at the Cultural Council meant a new and different interpretation of the Council's remit with respect to statistics. [...] The Cultural Barometer was discontinued, as was work on the yearbook of cultural statistics [...]. International influences [...] were accorded less importance, and contacts with the research community were cut back."

Today, no fewer than 25 Swedish institutions gather cultural statistics in Sweden, which gives us the most fragmented organization for the purpose in all of Europe. In the name of invigorating competition, Statistics Sweden is now but one among many flowers in the

field. But statistics produced with one or another interest in mind can lead attention in the wrong direction. Like a drunkard who searches in the arc of the lamplight for the keys he dropped in the dark.

In their essay, "If one can 'do sports', why not 'do culture'? – a critical view of certain statistical categories", Mats Trondman and Anna Lund show that the danger is more than hypothetical. "To do culture", a concept of their own creation, exemplifies the problem they discuss. The word is just as legitimate as "to do sports", but the fact that it has to be coined demonstrates an important difference in how activity in the two fields is registered.

In the statistics produced by the Swedish Children's Ombudsman and the National Board of Youth Affairs, young people's athletic activities are lumped into a single category, whereas cultural activities are recorded in several: music, drama, photography, etc. As a result, the material gives the impression that far more young people engage in sports than in cultural activities.

Trondman and Lund use data collected by Statistics Sweden on young people's (aged 16-25) leisure activities to demonstrate the distortion. They find that 62 per cent of the age group "do culture" at least once a week, 25 per cent once or more a month, and 13 per cent not at all. The corresponding figures for sports are 35, 8 and 57. As the author's comment: "the share of young people who "do culture" is far greater than the share who engage in (organized) sports".

This opens up an entirely new perspective, and another of their revelations hardly lessens the interest to research:

Young women "do culture" more extensively than men. The difference between the sexes is far more marked than that between social classes. The finding is yet another component of a well-known pattern: women are the custodians of culture in Sweden.

Overall, class differences turn out to mean surprisingly little with regard to degree of cultural activity. Trondman and Lund's conclusion, that cultural statistics need to be "a good deal more **fair** and truthful", lends concretion to Månsson's warnings.

In "The Power over Cultural Policy" Ants Viirman and Jenny Johannisson discuss an epistemological problem that further confuses the image statistics give: areas of cultural life that do not receive public funding are absent from discussions of cultural policy.

One of the most urgent tasks for research into the Arts would appear to be to examine the interplay between politically constructed subsidy programs and the areas of cultural life that are supported solely by active participants. I suspect that they may be more closely related than true believers in the Market are willing to admit. Commenting on the remarkable success of Swedish rock musicians some years ago, *New York Times* described it as the product of a fusion of bureaucracy and talent that was politically impossible in the USA. According to the paper, thanks to public financial support, the bands have had access to both instruments and places where they can rehearse ("Northern Lights of Rock'n'Roll Play Across America," *International Herald Tribune*, Sep 18, 2002).

Sven Nilsson uses ecological imagery to describe the interdependency of various parts of the cultural system, noting extensive stretches of terra incognita that may very well harbor innovations of the future. Professional artists can work and perform the world over, amateurs more

locally. Both, however, thrive on social interaction, and there is nothing to keep their practitioners from functioning at both levels. We are all dependent on individuals and groups in a tangle of branches and tendrils that might be called the ecology of culture. Musical performance, whether market-based or subsidized, cannot be separated from its deepest soil, the musicians in schools, youth centers and on websites. Cultural policy, Nilsson seems to be saying, needs to facilitate collaboration between the various levels.

Basing his argument on Richard Florida's concept, "creative cities", Nilsson calls for cultural policy based on the local and regional creative urge. His idea is seconded by Peter Aronsson in an essay on local versus national approaches to history. In Aronsson's view, local definitions of "cultural heritage" are likely to be more enduring than any of the efforts of national museal institutions to shed the burden of being custodians of the national heritage.

But how to translate the cultural free play into policy? Rhetoric aside, the fact remains that subsidies do influence the scope of creative freedom. As Geir Vestheim points out in his essay, "All cultural policy is instrumental", politicians are oriented toward their voters. Partisan political standpoints are essentially utilitarian and address a national, regional or local "we". The tendency toward instrumentalization is compounded, moreover, by an inherent paradox in policy relating to the Arts: the welfare ideology from which Swedish Arts policy springs implies a claim to be the antithesis of conservatism. But its political advocates (myself among them) risk being perceived as conservative when confronted with alternative interpretations of human circumstances. The welfare ideology makes a claim of goodness: of mutuality, a sharing of responsibility in the

framework of a carefully regulated society.

Artistic creativity is a matter of being true to one's bent of mind. The confrontation of the two is a contest, the rules of which emerge after the fact. Art can be cruel, it can challenge a democratic society's notions of meaning. The artist experiments with new forms of expression, with no guarantee as to how they will be received. Nor is there any guarantee that the experiment will succeed. Interpretations in the longer term are molded by interactions and confrontations between artists, the public, and critics.

Right-wing populist organizations like the Danish People's Party in Denmark, the Progress Party in Norway and Sverigedemokraterna here in Sweden exploit the gulf between sophisticated art and popular tastes; they would have the principles that guide public support decided by majority rule. (The recent controversies surrounding the University College of Arts Crafts and Design in Stockholm may be only a hint of what is to come, even here in Sweden.) Questions of taste are turned into party politics. Interpretations of immigration in cultural terms are a key element in the propaganda.

Two articles treat problems that have to do with ideas about multiculturalism, ethnicity and globalization. Tobias Harding analyzes the current contest between an individual-based concept of the nation and an ethnically defined multiculturalism, where group affiliation is central. Erling Bjurström analyzes modern racists' innovative imagery: instead of race, they speak of culture as the differentiating factor. Bjurström also identifies another factor that may foreshadow a paradoxical nexus between nationalistic cultural interpretations and globalization, namely, the commercialization of sports, where the market, governments and civil society (not least the

media) interact on a global level in an ongoing carnival of "banal nationalism".

A central feature of a government study of the cultural sphere in Sweden, soon to be debated in the Riksdag, is the principle that public money should be used to promote goal-related utilities, i.e., activities that serve manifest policy objectives. Cultural policy is that part of the polity that is dedicated to the furtherance of "communication, social cohesion and (stimulating) experiences". Inasmuch as "quality", according to the study, eludes precise definition, the creative Arts are treated as but one utility among many others in an administrative whole. The study turns a blind eye to the economic phenomenon known as the Baumol Effect (a.k.a. the Baumol Cost Disease): that increased productivity in dominant economic sectors, which drives personnel costs up, tends to marginalize or rule out activities that cannot be industrialized or made more productive (the law of the inefficiency of Art).

The principle that decisions regarding public support should be taken at an arm's length from the political sphere has disappeared in a bureaucratic fog. Objections to the instrumentalization of cultural support – raised by researchers like Ann-Sofie Köping, Jenny Lantz, Emma Stenström, Katja Lindqvist and Tobias Nielsén (all of whom have thought-provoking articles in the book) – are mentioned *en passant*, but otherwise ignored.

All creative development in the Arts presupposes rebellion against fixed rules. Formal steering fetters innovation. The same goes for cultural policy frameworks.

Take Vara, for example. Who outside the county, say, ten years ago had given the little town of Vara a thought? But a small group of enthusiasts, "local heroes", launched the idea of building a concert hall dedicated to performances of chamber music. They campaigned

doggedly until they had persuaded local politicians to support the project. Today, the Municipality of Vara has the second largest budget for culture in the whole of Sweden.

In retrospect the idea of building the hall appears a stroke of genius. It put Vara on the map. In terms of prospective

risk, the idea was madness. The small group of enthusiasts provided the mania needed to defy the odds.

What kind of cultural policy is conducive to thriving diversity? There is no prescription. But its starting point must be a desire always to create circles that transcend the squares.

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