



## Book Review

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Lina Spjut

*Att (ut)bilda ett folk:*

*Nationell och etnisk gemenskap i*

*Sveriges och Finlands svenskspråkiga*  
*läroböcker för folk- och grundskola*

*åren 1866–2016*

Örebro University (PhD diss.)

2018, 344 pp.

Lina Spjut's PhD dissertation *To Educate a People: National and Ethnic Communities in Elementary School Textbooks from Sweden and Finland 1866–2016* aims at analysing the ways that school textbooks in Sweden and the Swedish-language part of Finland have been reproducing ethnic and national identities over a long time period, 1866–2016. She chooses three school subjects; geography, history and civics – and the *prescribed imagined communities* that has been formulated there, adapting a well-known concept by Benedict Anderson.

The analysis puts a special weight on the relations between what has been considered “Swedish” and “Finnish”, and the parallel study of Sweden and Finland makes a very good departure point for understanding the historical construction of Swedishness. In Sweden, the majority Swedish culture has been so dominant that it has turned into something natural, that seldom is mentioned explicitly. Today, Swedishness is often described as being only a category of national citizenship, that is, to be an inhabitant of Sweden. Thus, Swedishness is often considered as something non-ethnic and non-cultural, while only

minorities in Sweden are described as ethnic communities. Thereby, Swedishness is often presented as something “above” the level of ethnicity, and only national in the ‘Western’ French-revolution way as in the common (but false) dichotomy between good/Western civic and bad/Eastern/ethnic nationalism. The hesitation to speak of ethnic Swedishness within Sweden is to a large degree fuelled by a fear that such a discourse would largen the gaps between the majority culture and national minorities. However, it is worth to ask whether such a dichotomy to the contrary strengthen that binary opposition between post-ethnic majority Swedes and ethnic “others.”

In Finland, the status of Swedishness is very different. Long into the nineteenth century, the Swedish language dominated in the elite and in official business, even though it was the mother tongue of only a minority. During the birth of modern nationalism, however, the Finnish language became hailed as the true expression of Finnishness, and it was also adopted by many intellectuals that had been Swedish-speaking until then. After that, the status of the Swedish language has declined. It is still the mother tongue of some five per cent of the population, and legally it is equal with Finnish as one of the country's two official languages. Despite most Swedish-speakers belong to the middle and working classes, Swedish remains often associated with a traditional elite.

The position of the Swedish language has been under constant debate, and right-wing Finnish nationalists still aim

at dethroning it from its equal status with Finnish. In the Swedish-speaking continuity, there is a widespread feeling of defensiveness and of being misunderstood. Swedish-speaking Finns also complain of the widespread ignorance in Sweden, where many people actually are not aware that Swedish in Finland is a living language. Some Swedes tend, probably in a false and hyper-correct manner to pose as radical or anti-nationalist, to use the Finnish-language forms of major Finnish cities such as Helsinki or Turku, rather than their official Swedish-language forms (*Helsingfors*, Åbo), thereby following the logic of nationalism where there can only be one language in one nation state.

Spjut sets up as the overall aim of the dissertation to “contribute to a deepened understanding of the role of school textbooks in the fostering of imagined communities”. This aim is operationalised by studying the ways such imagined communities are narrated through historiography, by what she calls an *asymmetric comparison*, since she compares the majority community in Sweden and a minority community in Finland. She has also strived at identifying changes in the textbook narratives, and at understanding them in the context of the times when they were written. The starting point is 1866, since Finland in that year introduced regular primary education all over the country (which already then existed in Sweden). Rather convincingly, she argues that school textbooks more or less reflect the dominant ideas of their respective ages, since they have had to comply with curricula to be possible to sell on the market.

The explicit theoretical framework of the study is twofold. For the analysis of the production and reproduction of imagined communities, Spjut rests on theories about uses of history, which are

regarded mainly as bearers of ideologies of different kinds. Since the study is situated in the education discipline, and she analyses school textbooks, she also applies curriculum theory. Apart from the comparative method, she also applies Norman Fairclough’s critical discourse analysis (CDA).

In the empirical section of the book, Spjut presents her main results in five thematically organised chapters. First, she shows the ways that Swedishness and Finnishness has been constructed as different and partly overlapping categories; as nationalities, as races, as ethnicities, and as majorities or minorities. Here she also discusses to what extent such categories have been described as indigenous, or as something that has entered at later stages of history. Over time, it has not necessarily been portrayed as positive to be the “oldest” and “original” group within a territory. In nineteenth century Sweden, for example, the “Swedes” were generally described as relative late-comers in history, since they had – according to a dominant historiography of that time – conquered the territory from “inferior” cultures described as Sami and Finnish.

Not surprisingly, Spjut shows that there has been a much more open discussion about Swedishness and Finnishness in Finland than in Sweden, and that there is a more hidden discourse on Swedish ethnicity in Sweden – underneath an explicit discourse of Swedishness as something only relating to citizenship and nationhood.

In the second empirical chapter, Spjut analyses the ways that the birth of the Swedish and Finnish nation states have been described – particularly in the latter case. In history-writing, there has been a special focus on the ways Finland became part of the Swedish

kingdom in the Middle Ages. Often that was described as a part of Swedish-led crusades toward the territory of what was to become Finland, which could either be interpreted as the triumph of Western civilisation, or as a form of Swedish imperialism or colonisation. For the Finland Swedes, it was early on necessary to prove that Swedishness had an older origin in Finland, in order to prove the group's relative indigenosity, and to avoid Swedishness in Finland being formulated as a result of conquest from the West. Therefore, Finland-Swedish historiography also preferred to focus on the Viking Age (c. 800–1050), in order to prove such continuity from periods before the annexation of Finland into Sweden.

In a subsequent chapter, Spjut treats the historiography on the period from the thirteenth century to 1809, when Finland was an integrated part of the Swedish kingdom. There, she highlights some interesting differences between Sweden-Swedish and Finland-Swedish history-writing. Pro-Finnish actions that were considered nationally undermining in Sweden, have been described as patriotic in Finland, for example. In this part, Spjut also underlines the tendency in Sweden-Swedish historiography – all over the time period – to treat Finland as a foreign country, anachronistically projecting the national borders onto the centuries before 1809. Such tendencies are not hard to find in contemporary Sweden-Swedish treatments of that time period. For example, migrations across the Gulf of Bothnia from Finland to present-day Sweden are regularly treated as examples of international migration. To add to that, events in Finland are rarely described at all in Sweden-Swedish historiography.

The chapter about how history after 1809 has been presented is a little more

heterogeneous. Something that makes the analysis by necessity more diverse, is the fact that Spjut to a large extent studies narratives on events that were more or less “contemporary” in older textbooks, but more clearly “historical” in newer ones. She treats a set of quite disparate events such as the Finnish Civil War, the Second World War, and the post-war immigration of Finnish citizens to Sweden. As in the previous chapter, there is a general tendency in Sweden-Swedish textbooks not to discuss Finland and Finnish–Swedish relations at all, while the Finland-Swedish textbooks have Finnish–Swedish relations as a constant red thread.

The last empirical chapter is also rather disparate. Its common denominator consists of treatments of Finnishness through history in present-day Sweden. The bulk of the analysis concerns *Finnish-speaking* phenomena in that territory, for example peasants that migrated across the Gulf of Bothnia during the early modern period, but also the Finnish-speaking minority in the northern-most part of present Sweden, which in the latest decades has been constituted as a separate ethnicity – the Tornedalians with a particular language, Meänkieli. Spjut also discusses the treatment of groups with descent in present-day Finland that has migrated into Sweden in later stages of history. Here, she also touches upon the Swedish-speaking Finns that have migrated to Sweden, which is a very “hidden” group at least in a Sweden-Swedish setting – for example, there is no clear-cut word for describing that group.

Generally, Spjut shows that all these examples, in line with other examples mentioned above, are relatively absent in Sweden-Swedish historiography. If Finns (at least the Finnish-speaking ones) are mentioned, they have been “othered” in

various ways. They have often been exoticized, and described with stereotypes connected to Finnishness, for example being silent and macho. In other cases, they have been lumped into a general category of “immigrants” separated from “real” Swedes.

In her concluding chapter, Spjut underlines the relative silence about matters concerning Finnishness within Sweden, a tendency that has not been less apparent after the 1960s, when the last remnants of explicit ethnic discourses vanished. Before that, it was common to discuss differences between Swedes and Finns in a manner that more or less belonged to the field of racial biology, differing between Germanic and Fenno-Ugric peoples. After that, there is a persisting implicit or “silent” Swedish nationalism that is explicitly civic-national, but Spjut convincingly argues that it is in effect ethnic and often racist as well. In these discussions, Spjut adds to what has already been underlined in many recent research efforts in other disciplines and other examples. Her results prove to be distinct, since she put two different ways of narrating ethnic Swedishness side by side: one that has always been explicit (the one in Finland), and one that is increasingly implicit (in Sweden).

Spjut also demonstrates the persistent ambivalences within Finland-Swedish historiography. It has almost always been loyal to the Finnish national project, but with a particular emphasis on ethnic Swedishness. Largely, Finland-Swedish historiography echoes the Finland-Finnish one, but with some noteworthy differences. For example, there has been a larger interest in the Viking Age, since that has always been framed as something particular to Scandinavian-language groups. Similarly, the Finland-Swedish historiography has

been more focused on Scandinavian and Nordic relations within history, than the Finnish-language historiography.

With such a large study that Spjut has undertaken, of a long time period and with a vast amount of source materials, it is easy to propose and discuss alternate approaches. For example, had the results become different if Spjut had chosen other school subjects to study than she did? For example, textbooks within the subjects of Swedish language and literature? Textbooks in the national language and literature have been shown to be important elements of national identity construction – in the former case not least in order to promote discourses on geography and history. In the present case, it would also be interesting to see to what extent “Swedishness” has been differently narrated in literature rather than historiography. This is an interesting issue, not least since it has been common in Sweden to include Finland-Swedish authors in the Swedish national canon, for example Johan Ludvig Runeberg, Zacharias Topelius, and Tove Jansson.

Concerning the positioning of the study within a larger research setting, it is understandable that Spjut emphasizes previous research on textbooks and their identity-producing aspects, since it is a dissertation in education. Perhaps though, a stronger emphasis could have been placed on earlier research on historiography as such, since Spjut’s study is just as much a contribution to nationalism and memory-making studies, as one to educational history and/or curriculum studies.

I have also some remarks on the theoretical-methodological setup, in which Spjut makes a hierarchical difference between the dissertation’s “framework” (*ramverk*), that is placed above the dissertation’s “theory” (*teori*). The former

is said to consist of curriculum theory, while the latter is identified as “theories on the uses of history” (*historiebruks-teori*, a particular Swedish concept which may preferably be conceptualised as *memory studies* or *heritage studies*). It is truly an unusual step to introduce a level above that of theory. However, I cannot see in what ways either level is more or less abstract or general than the other. Rather, both play more or less the same role in the actual investigation. In reality, they are two parallel theoretical horizons, and that is very well so.

Below “framework” and “theory” comes “method”, which (as was mentioned earlier) is divided into a) critical discourse analysis and b) “comparative method.” The latter is presented in a common-sense manner; Spjut makes comparisons between Sweden and Finland, between different time settings, and between three school subjects. The critical discourse analysis is only occasionally implemented in the actual empirical investigation, illuminating certain discursive patterns in the material. Still, it is questionable to what extent this method actually contributes further to the results. Not the least, the signum of critical discourse analysis, namely the third step where the discourses should be explained by a larger analysis of ideologies in a non-discursive social, political and economic context, is more discussed than actually accomplished.

I also have some other remarks on the theoretical and methodological setup. One is that *implicit* expressions of imagined communities are said to be illuminated with the help of concepts from uses of history theory, while the *explicit* ones are said to be analysed by critical discourse analysis. I have a difficulty understanding why not both explicit and implicit expressions might be analysed through both uses of history

glasses and with a critical discourse analysis, albeit in different ways.

However, Spjut is far from alone in this; such remarks on the theoretical and methodological apparatus could have been made to numerous other historical investigations. Luckily, the big strength of Lina Spjut’s dissertation lies in her ambition and impressing empirical effort, and she has contributed with many new and deepened insights into the ways that Swedishness has been constructed on both sides of the Gulf of Bothnia.

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