



Book Review

Lina Rahm

Educational Imaginaries:

A Genealogy of the Digital Citizen

Linköping University (PhD diss.)

2019, 159 pp. [+ 14, 15, 40, 30 pp.]

Computers are today often considered as media or as tools for creating economic growth. Still, questions about power relations and inequality cannot be excluded when considering digitalisation. Its effects on democracy and equality precede the internet. Sweden, as a politically conscious and constructive welfare state, has a long tradition of harnessing information technology as an instrument of societal development. In a probably typical Nordic way, digital policy is especially tightly linked to questions of education and democracy. Lina Rahm studies this theme in an interesting intersection of popular education, computer politics and digital citizenship. In her dissertation, Rahm focuses on digital citizenship, and how it is understood by a set of adult students at folk high schools (*folkhögskolor*) in their daily life.

Rahm's approach with an open definition of digital citizenship is well founded in Foucauldian method and her choice of theoretical framework. Exactly what digital citizenship is, is irrelevant for Rahm, while the important thing is that it exists and that it also has been considered desirable. As a matter of fact, digital citizenship is an important imaginary that has all kinds of implications for how education, society and digitalisation are conceived, and what is interesting to Rahm, is that

this imaginary has been actively managed by the state and the labour movement. The digitalisation is a complex process and by digging into the different layers of approaches and actions that have been taken over the last six decades regarding popular education, Rahm shows how information technology has come to be so closely connected to citizenship.

The dissertation consists of an extensive introduction (*kappa*), and four separate empirical studies, of which two had been published at the time of the publication of the dissertation. The overall research questions are three: How has the relationship between citizenship and computerisation changed over time? Why have these two phenomena been so closely related? How has this relation been perceived in the field of popular education? The dissertation is based on a wide range of source materials, ranging from policy papers and political speech to educational books and films. In addition, the above-mentioned description of actualised digital citizenship in popular education was done with empirical methods, based on interviews with adult students about their enactment of citizenship. A close reading of policy and educational materials from 1951 to 2018, with focus on sources from the 1950s, 1980s and the years between 2014 and 2017, has been done to distinguish different ideas and patterns of thought and to identify different historical stages in the problematization of digitalisation.

Rahm's dissertation presents a number of interesting findings. It is notable that the introduction of computers was

first and foremost considered a societal issue in Swedish adult education. Besides teaching how to use computers and worrying about providing computer access in an equal way, there were, according to Rahm, above all far-reaching efforts to educate people about the effects of the computers and in the beginning especially workers on how to handle this development. Initially, during the 1950s, digitalisation was seen as an opportunity and the main concern was the decrease of work opportunities that it led to. Later the aim of adult education was to give people critical understanding of digitalisation, as a development that needed to be actively governed. During this period active citizenship also within computerisation and participatory design were important elements in adult education. In the 1980s and 1990s, the rise in computer access was perceived as inevitable, and by the 2010s, the aim of adult education shifted from trying to control the development to educating the individuals who were “excluded,” the digital drop-outs. As penetration of the digital culture approaches 100 percent in Sweden, individuals who are not connected are considered marginalised, defective as citizens.

Today, the ones who are perceived as problematic are, according to Rahm, firstly, people who are already outside society and who need to be included with digital/educational means, secondly people who do not want to be digital citizens and need to be motivated and thirdly, people, that are rare-users or wrong-users and simply do not use the digital technologies efficiently enough to be digital citizens. It is a pity, but understandable, that the author has excluded the big efforts done by the libraries especially during the last decade, in the education, support and

motivation of these groups. Rahm correctly points out, that the understanding of these people as excluded or losers, is significant for how we imagine our society and citizenship.

The rich landscape of popular education and computer politics is described and analysed in an interesting and enlightening way in this dissertation. Important historical phenomena, like the labour computer (*LO-datorn*), or the discussions and education about the threats of the computers in the 1970s, are given a revealing context that has bearings even today. Studying popular education as part of Swedish computer politics, and the important function of the sociotechnical imaginary as a governing tool, contributes to understanding digitalisation not only as an inevitable process, but a construct of our time.

Jessica Parland-von Essen
University of Helsinki
jessicapve@gmail.com