



## Book Review

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Victor Johansson

*De organiserade eleverna: Den svenska elevrörelsens riksförbund och deltagande i utbildningspolitiken 1938–2005*

Stockholm: Stockholms universitet  
(PhD diss.)  
2025, 312 pp.

In Victor Johansson's doctoral dissertation, *The Organized Students: The Swedish School Student Movement's National Associations and Engagement in Educational Policy 1938–2005*, the history of the Swedish school student movement (i.e. secondary school level) is examined. Primary focus is on the movement's engagement in educational policy and school politics. The period coincides with the rise and various phases of the democratic welfare state, which the author also recognizes as a time of establishment and flourishing, but also as a period of constant change, for the school student movement.

The starting point of the study is determined by the founding of two organizations that became central to the emergence of the student movement from the late 1930s: The Federation for Students at Higher Technical Schools (*Tekniska Läroverkets Elevförbund*, TLE), as the federation soon came to be called, and, somewhat later, what would become The Central Organization for Students in Sweden (*Sveriges Elevers Centralorganisation*, SECO). The end of the period, 2005, is more pragmatically chosen, but essentially relates to the decentralization and marketization reforms of the 1990s, which, by the early 2000s, greatly

limited students' opportunities to influence school policy at the national level. Instead, the movement's focus shifted towards the local level and local school activities.

### *Scope and motivation*

The introductory chapter presents the dissertation's research scope and scientific motivation, particularly in relation to previous research in the history of education, childhood and youth history, and on social movements. Johansson argues that previous studies have paid too little attention to school students' active, organized, and long-term engagement in external societal and school policy issues, favoring more limited perspectives where their agency is reduced to intra-institutional processes, e.g. social and collective identity making, norm integration, or education in democratic methods. When an outward political agency among school students on secondary level has been highlighted, it is usually centered on isolated events. The more extensive structures for political influence established at Swedish or international educational institutions have so far been overlooked.

Johansson also recognizes motives for the thesis extending pure academic knowledge. An historicized understanding of students' potential to contribute to school politics can be important for today's student organizations, teachers, and educational policymakers. Acknowledging how school students have – and can – be activated in educational policy carries significant potential for a democratic society.

***Aim, RQ:s and analytical framework***

Given the knowledge gap in previous research and the contemporary societal motive, the purpose of the dissertation is to study the formation, development, and organized participation of the Swedish school student movement in national educational politics from the 1930s to the early 2000s. The purpose is linked to three research questions: “How, and why, did the national associations of the Swedish school student movement take form, and what made this initial organizing possible?”; “How did the organizations evolve in relation to surrounding political opportunity structures?”; and “What organizational principles and repertoires of influence did the school student organizations utilize to achieve their political goals?”

Theoretical inspiration is mainly drawn from research on social movements and organizational sociology. This distinguishes the dissertation from previous research on student organization at Swedish educational institutions, which has often relied on theories of class, gender, and collective/social identity formation (e.g. Florin and Johansson 1993; Johansson 2000; Sundkvist 2006; Norlin 2010; Backman Prytz 2014).

In this dissertation, central analytical tools include the concepts of *political opportunity structures*, *organizational principles*, and *repertoires of influence*. According to Johansson, these concepts make it possible to capture the dynamics between student organization and external political events, while clarifying historical changes. Different periods confronted students with different opportunities to influence, principles for channeling organized political action shifted, and so did the repertoire of means avail-

able to the student movement (a table of this is presented on p. 246).

***Sources, methods and background***

The source material includes organizational journals, various types of archival documents, publications, and daily press. The student unions’ journals have been a main source. The approach and method are described as inspired by a “history from below” perspective, where forgotten actors – in this case, students and student unions – are made visible and their actions and experiences are given historical significance. The dissertation is also colored by the genre of organizational history and by the case study tradition. In any case, it is students’ collective, not individual, actions that are central in the dissertation.

The introduction is followed by a background chapter providing historical context to the dissertation topic – a kind of prehistory, highlighting student and youth cultures and student organization at Swedish and European educational institutions during the 19th and early 20th centuries. What existed before the postwar student movement and the breakthrough of the democratic society, and how does student organization seem to differ between the different eras? The chapter also describes the Swedish political context when the student movement took shape, with the model of corporatism as a central factor in the emerging welfare state.

***The emergence of the movement(s)***

The empirically grounded chapters mainly follow a chronological structure. Chapter three deals with the emergence of the two national student organizations, TLE and SECO. It shows how their formation occurred against the back-

ground of a school system in social and organizational transformation, and a new welfare model being established. Corporative organizational principles governed most social associations. Students were thus to make their voices heard and influence policy as a collective interest group among many others. The ongoing modernization of the education system and attempts to find new and unified systemic forms also provided an opportunity for students to actively participate in the development. To make impact, however, required adopting organizational principles that could lead to such influence, and here centralized national unions – supported by local councils and student bodies – became the solution.

During this early period, however, the student movement was not a movement with a unified voice, but rather two different unions rooted in different parts of the education system and with different ideas about what the future school should look like. Should education be opened to a broader social stratum and unified (SECO's vision), or should it retain its socially and academically differentiated character (TLE's view)?

Chapter four focuses on organizational principles and repertoires of influence of the two student organizations from World War II to the late 1960s. Despite different school policy goals, the unions' political participation and ways of influencing through parliamentary, corporative and cooperative forms were similar. The interest association model (*intresseföreningsmodellen*), central for the Swedish popular movements at the time, became the organizational guiding star. Within SECO, there was also a strong connection to the Social Democratic reform program regarding national schooling.

### ***Towards activism and mobilization***

Chapter five describes internal conflicts within the movement, arising from differences in views on primary and secondary school reforms in the 1960s and on the corporative model used for student organization. The strong and exclusive connection between a small leadership group within the movement and the political power began to be seen as problematic, this as most members were far from real means to influence. With increased pressure for participatory democratic principles in the late 1960s (supported by the era's political awakening and overall public engagement), older organizational forms were revised. Simultaneously, a more extensive and outwardly directed repertoire of influence developed. This included extra-parliamentary activities, campaigns, and activism. The student movement increasingly became a sort of union-inspired movement organization, aiming not only to represent its members but also to mobilize them. At the same time, much of the legacy of the older corporative organizational model remained.

### ***Broadening the repertoire of influence***

Chapter six deals with the 1970s and how the repertoire of influence expanded even further, especially in connection with the so-called grading issue (*betygsfrågan*). This issue was linked to the more fundamental view of what education should be, as symbolized by grades and the grading system. Should school be a place for competition and sorting, or for equality and less competitive ideals?

In the wake of the grading issue, an even broader palette of means of influence developed, consisting of extra-parliamentary strategies (e.g. campaigns,

boycotts, petitions, demonstrations, and local school strikes) and parliamentary and corporative cooperative solutions (e.g. participation in committees, meetings with politicians, and responses to government inquiries). Through these campaigns, the movement became more unified, and the two previously separate unions merged into the joint The Student Organization in Sweden in 1982 (*Elevorganisationen i Sverige*).

### ***Decentralization, municipalization and political neutralization***

Chapters seven and eight discuss how the newly formed joint student organization adapted to major changes in the Swedish school system, general politics, and society during the 1980s and 1990s. Neoliberalism, economic austerity, the dismantling of the corporative model, and decentralization of responsibility for school governance and its practical organization are highlighted as significant components. Decentralization and local municipalities' increased responsibility and power in education meant that many foundations for the national organization disappeared, and its main target – the state and its educational policy – largely vanished.

Instead, the local level, local politics, and individual schools became the most important arenas for influence. Strengthening student rights and local participation, the fight against budget cuts, and influence over the physical and social school environment became main issues. National campaigns and protest mobilization disappeared from the repertoire of influence, which instead shifted toward media presence, opinion formation, and lobbying – activities increasingly carried out by employed staff rather than students themselves.

The connection to traditional core issues in school policy became weaker, and in 2005 the student organization was depoliticized by abolishing its joint “school policy program.” In the new decentralized, choice-based, and individualistic school system, all types of members and opinions were to be accommodated. By the end of the study period, the movement had transformed into a kind of civic association, organizationally similar to an interest group, but without a unifying reform-oriented school policy agenda and compass.

### ***Concluding claims***

The concluding chapter summarizes the dissertation and presents its results. In short, Johansson argues that school students throughout the period acted as collective interest actors in several school policy fields, this in organized forms and at local, regional, and national levels. This occurred as a movement with the ambition and power to influence educational policy. However, the student movement is not to be seen as a uniform or unchanging collective actor but was rather characterized by the ability to strategically adapt to shifting political realities. This did not happen without internal tensions. The movement balanced between formal cooperation and a more activist and participatory democratic approach, as well as between striving for autonomy and giving in to external demands.

In relation to previous research focused on self-education and norm-integrating processes, or research that has attributed students limited political significance, the dissertation thus contributes new knowledge about student organizations as active political actors with long-term influence on educational policy, Johansson claims.

The combination of perspectives from research on social movements, organizational theory, and educational history results, according to the author, in a more dynamic understanding of the student movement, avoiding simplified dichotomies between students as either passive or radically active. Rather, it was as strategic pragmatists that the student unions navigated the school policy landscape. Through such insights, the dissertation contributes both to the histories of education, childhood and youth, and to the history of educational policy in Sweden.

#### *Notes from a review*

Based on a review of Johansson's dissertation it can be stated that it is a study juggling with many analytical argumentations, but that it overall delivers what it promises. The dissertation has many merits, which I will return to shortly.

Some weaknesses and silences should, however, be noted. The theoretical framework and concepts work well and clarifying for the dissertation's overall agenda, but they do not really help to concretize the "why" question – i.e. why the school student movement took shape. The answer is rather passive: the context enabled it. Nor does the framework help to explain where the actual political influence lay during different time periods. The dissertation convincingly shows the potential for influence and that mobilization occurred – but when and how did this influence translate into political impact, and what, in that case, were the school student movement's political victories? The magnitude of the movement's actual influence thus appears less clarified in the dissertation.

Furthermore, the dissertation's collective focus and the absence of interviews

means that individuals – many of whom later made careers in organizational life, politics, and/or business – are rendered invisible. The choice not to conduct interviews is understandable; boundaries must be drawn, and including interviews would have required a different type of study. The absence of interviews nevertheless creates an – at times – frustrating silence. A politically oriented movement and its power resources are reasonably also built on engaged and charismatic leading figures (on elements of charismatic authority, to use Weber's term).

Interviews could have clarified both individual events and individuals' roles in the history of the movement, and probably also shed light on organizational issues linked to a union life characterized by a constant shift of members. And to connect to the intra-institutional self-education perspective (which the dissertation seeks to move away from), one wonders what the individual students who engaged in leading positions in the movement gained in terms of knowledge, contacts, and other forms of capital, and how this could later be multiplied and applied elsewhere. What did students personally gain from participating in this type of activity, both in the present of the studied past and for the future?

The choice to move away from analyses of class, gender, and identity formation processes also makes the internal constitution of the student movement appear somewhat static. An analysis interested in changing gender norms, the movement's shifting social composition, and general shifts in ideas about youth as political subjects during this more than half-century-long period would likely have contributed to important insights also into the movement's internal drivers. As regards to for example gender,

it seems like there was quite a change if one compares the “young old men” who engaged in the school student organizations in the mid-twentieth century, and the young people of mixed genders who led the movement at the end of the period. Choosing to exclude such perspectives – i.e. the flesh and blood of the movement – thus affects the understanding.

A critical reading also raises questions about the relationships between center and periphery – national versus local, urban versus rural – in understanding the geography of the school student movement, as well as about some silences regarding contextualization (e.g. the concrete impact of the so-called independent school reform on local organizational culture in the 1990s and onwards). In addition, some newer research is missing; it would, to give just one example, have been interesting to see a connection to the national and international peace movement’s activation of secondary school youth (e.g. Wright 2020), and how this might relate to the rise of the Swedish school student movement.

That said, Johansson’s dissertation is an important and truly interesting contribution to the scholarship on student movements, and is well worth a read. It is a solid empirical and theoretical study, and a very welcome contribution to research aimed at understanding central dimensions of postwar student organization and its relation to educational policy in particular. Regarding its purpose and research questions, it is a dissertation that essentially delivers what it promises and contributes new and important knowledge. It is written by an author who demonstrates analytical transparency, the ability to build on previous studies, and to find fruitful new perspectives. Not

least, the dissertation is characterized by the generosity of recurrently highlighting its own limitations. In short, it is a well-crafted piece of work.

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