



## Book Review

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Karolina Wiell

*Bad mot lort och sjukdom: Den  
privathygieniska utvecklingen i  
Sverige 1880–1949*

Uppsala University (PhD diss.)

2018, 259 pp.

Karolina Wiell's thesis addresses the phenomena of hygienism, that is an emerging ideology in which certain aspects of health (especially personal hygiene) became a normative practice. In Sweden and other countries, this coincided with, among other things, a modern housing policy and the growth of municipal solutions to the hygiene problem via, for example, the municipal management of water and sewage systems. The ideology of hygienism influenced a wide range of practices, including the construction of modern school buildings, new teaching content (health education) and the building of saunas and public baths. The emergence of hygienism in Sweden towards the end of the nineteenth century and how its norms gradually came to interact with the expansion of saunas or public baths (*badstugor*) in the first half of the twentieth century constitute the focus of the thesis. The thesis also discusses the emergence of hygienism in relation to education. The source materials include teaching material and teacher journals, which makes it a relevant study in the field of the history of education.

### **Aim, starting points and material**

The first chapter presents the research field, theoretical framework, sources, methods and the specified aim. The aim

is to map and explain the underlying reasons and motives for the expansion of public baths in Sweden in the period 1880-1949, in relation to the general changes of norms of private hygiene, baths and cleanliness at the time.

The approach involves several overlapping research positions and theoretical perspectives. For example, there are references to economic history research on waste disposal and social hygienism, social historical studies on the attitudes to social care and idea historical studies on health and medicine. Central studies, which partly deal with the same research area, are presented, for example, Henrik Björck's *Folkhemsbyggare* (2008) and Jenny Björkman's *Vård för samhällets bästa – Debatten om tvångsvård i svensk lagstiftning 1850-1970* (2001).

An important theoretical starting-point is theories on norm change, which explain how ideas and perspectives arise, change and spread, as well as theories on power to clarify how certain perspectives on hygiene and bathing could have such an impact. Hygienism is in this context defined as a broad concept which comprises everything from housing and city planning to the hygiene of skin and bacteria. Based on this definition, we can say that the concepts of personal hygiene and private hygiene focus on bodily cleanliness, while private hygiene involves the norm of bodily hygiene.

Wiell uses a broad range of sources dealing with hygiene and baths to answer the research questions. Journals, pamphlets, parliamentary documents,

reports, association material, maps, photos, blueprints and textbooks are examples of sources for the thesis. The material has served as the basis for creating a database to make compilations and analyses of how the concept of hygiene changed over time. Even if it is not stated explicitly in the thesis, I would say that the approach is source pluralistic (Myrdal 2007), as the nature of the material varies and we are invited to follow the route of the hygiene concept through medical texts, detailed parliamentary proposals, text books and information campaigns. The thesis is richly illustrated with examples from the source material such as maps, excerpts from journals and photos, and this facilitates the reading of the thesis and gives the reader the opportunity to assess the relevance of the thesis conclusions.

## Result

In the second chapter of the thesis, there is an account of the overarching change of the hygiene concept through historical glimpses in the period 1880–1950. The chapter builds both on existing research and other material such as *Nordisk familjebok*. Wiell points out that in the beginning of the period there was a link between hygiene and health promotion, for example, healthy lifestyle and the science of human health. At the end of the period, certain changes had been made and there was now also a link between hygiene, on one hand, and washing and sauna, on the other. According to Wiell, this can be seen as a normative displacement where baths and sauna baths become part of hygienism.

The historical development of the saunas is studied in general terms in chapter three for the period 1880–1950. At the beginning of this period, we can note that access to washing facilities va-

ried greatly. Geographically, the supply of facilities was relatively good in north-west Värmland and the Finn Forest, and north eastern Norrland. With great probability the saunas were not used only for “traditional” baths, but were used in different ways in agriculture to dry grain. We can also note that at the end of the first period studied, i.e. at the turn of the nineteenth century, around 190 bathing facilities for school children were built. However, in the period 1920–1949, the number of facilities expanded and as many as around 10,000 saunas were built.

The financing and managing of these facilities were often a mixture of public and private financing, but most of the saunas were funded through private initiatives and small associations, while public funding occurred in some instances.

In chapters four and five, the development of the private hygienic message is analysed through a study of debates and discussions in various arenas. The empirical material in the chapters mainly consists of journals for the medical profession, investigations, political documents and parliamentary material.

In the period 1880–1920, the Swedish parliament generally debated the importance of school hygiene, and, among other things, the issue of health education was on the agenda. Even the role of the district physician regarding hygiene was debated. Several of the proposals submitted to parliament were authored by physicians. Lectures given at society meetings centred on hygienic issues and the need of bath facilities in schools. Several major investigations of hygiene were carried out – nine or ten, depending on what is counted. Two of these investigations were in progress for several years. Axel Key’s hygiene investigation in the 1880s and the 1914

school hygiene investigation were very extensive. Key, who was also a member of the grammar school committee, gave an account of the health condition of Swedish school children in an 800-page long report. The bulk of hygiene studies had a focus on schools. The association of Swedish elementary school teachers even initiated their own hygiene studies in school. The importance of efforts made in this area in schools was also evidenced in the fact that school inspectors were assigned the tasks of analysing the hygienic situation in schools.

Wiell's thesis also identifies several contexts in which hygienism occurs, besides parliament and the government official report system. There was a considerable text production also in textbooks and journals emphasising the importance of hygiene and taking baths. Examples of such journals are medical journals and women magazines such as *Dagny*, *Hertha*, *Idun* and *Tidskrift för hemmet*.

The publications had many varied target groups. According to Wiell, a large part of the texts addressed the public, but one target group was also professional categories such as physicians and teachers. Through textbooks, pupils were also targeted.

Based on reports, debates and political discussions, Wiell can establish that knowledge of the benefits of a clean and sound body was formulated and disseminated in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. This was a condition for the development of hygienism. However, the state was only modestly interested in financing the saunas. But it is obvious that the issue of hygiene was central and addressed at the highest level of society.

In chapter five, there is an analysis of formative elements that can shed light on and explain the growth of sau-

nas in the first half of the twentieth century. The analysis was carried out with the help of process tracking method. This method involves identifying central events as formative elements which, by extension, contributed to the growth of saunas. A case in point was the foundation of the Association of Swedish District Physicians, an association that advocated health education as a school subject and also the need of saunas. A further formative element was the school hygiene reports, which greatly contributed to increasing knowledge of hygiene dramatically. It was, for instance, noted in a report that 50% of pupils were ill long-term. These reports became part of a general gathering of information about the school system. Statistics on the pupils' work and sleep hours were collected, as well as information of teachers' work hours.

These reports are also an example of how early the school system was part of an international exchange of information, as English research was cited as a basis for analysis in the report. It is also noteworthy that there was a conspicuous international element in the proposals advocating health education submitted to parliament, and in the proposals emphasising the issue of hygiene in school. Norway, France USA and Japan were all countries that the proposals regarded as exemplary at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The investigation reports also inspired other reports. In one of these, a survey was distributed, and 1,400 schools responded. The issue of curriculum content and teachers' qualifications were also discussed in connection with the investigations. The reports were cited in political debates and also in other central areas, which meant that they were widely disseminated, for instance to representatives of elementary schools.

The political debate and the subsequent decisions had formative elements as health education was stressed as important information for pupils. Even if political decisions did not directly favour the building of saunas, the enlightenment efforts about hygiene and baths were promoted and schools and teacher colleges played important roles. Summing up, Wiell argues that the subsequent process influencing the building of saunas contained elements such as organising, collecting facts, arguing and politics.

In chapter six, there is a rich qualitative analysis of the character of the texts Weill has collected. Here, the focus is on how the private hygienic message has changed over time and its impact on both the receiver and the sender. Two types of texts were chosen from the period 1888-1910. The texts either targeted schools, or the public, specifically women. Regarding school syllabi, four of the textbooks analysed were in the main informative and had a "hygienic" message regardless of when it was written and to whom it was addressed (elementary school, girls' school, or grammar schools). In brief, the basic theme can be summed up in the following arguments: insufficient personal hygiene can lead to premature death, but health education can lead to a better life/healthier life and that a more productive population should be created. Notably, one of the authors cited was Curt Wallis. Wallis was professor, Member of Parliament and analyst of hygiene issues. As a politician, he also submitted proposals that hygiene issues must be considered in schools. He also gave lectures at Nordic teacher conferences.

Chapter seven of the thesis is titled "Ett budskap - två vägar, 1920 och framåt" [One message, two roads - 1920 and onwards] and centres on the two strategies that in various ways can be seen to manifest the ideas of the benefits of ta-

king baths. One study treats the establishment of Föreningen för Folkbad [The Society for Public Bathing]. This society provided information and ran campaigns of various kinds to advocate the benefits of sauna baths and the importance of sauna building. The society distributed flyers, books, and pamphlets. They wrote articles in different journals, and gave lectures to important actors and participated in radio programmes and made films. The main aim was to get more saunas built, but the society had scant financial resources and was rather a normative, controlling and resource intermediary organisation. For example, resources were mediated from the Royal Pensions Board to the sauna building.

Another actor was the agitator and entrepreneur Jan Ottosson, an energetic school teacher, who in conjunction with various gymnastics associations spread information on the beauty of saunas. The typical scenario was that Ottosson gave a lecture, a sauna committee was formed and a sauna was built, financed by the local people through day work and the teacher spread information of how to use it. Local non-profit organisations were important actors in this case.

In the last chapter, Wiell presents a concluding discussion of the scope of the hygiene issue, noting that everyone could relate to this issue and that it pertained to many areas of life and was thus part of societal building at the turn of the twentieth century. The emphasis is on the hygiene issue as a perfect example of how a norm is created (the importance of cleanliness), consulted and realised. A norm, with a background in a medical discovery (bacteria) which is then transformed into knowledge of how to manage personal hygiene, a norm which by extension is materialised in politics and buildings.

## Conclusions and implementation

In general, Wiell's thesis is marked by accuracy. A random test of references and sources showed that the material has been handled appropriately. But there are some minor inconsistencies that I need to point out. The source and reference list are not completely consistent. For example, Official Statistics of Sweden is mentioned twice, under archive and references. There are also examples of references to sources studied in the text that are missing in the archive list, for instance, Red Cross archive documents. In some instances, there are minor mistakes such as confusion of terms regarding grammar school and elementary school/teachers College.

In connection with the thesis work, a database of texts on hygiene was built and, according to the author, the ambition was to come close to a "complete investigation." The material is comprehensive, and a reasonable collection strategy was used, but there are still material and texts missing. A quick search in the journal of elementary school teachers, for example, the *Svensk lärartidning* 1895 and 1896 showed that hygiene issues were highlighted on several occasions, but are not mentioned in this thesis. In view of the close connection between the hygiene reports and schools, a more thorough review of journals for teachers would have been highly pertinent.

Also, the journal *Fylgia: Tidskrift för hygienisk sjelfhjelp i hemmen* [Fylgia: A Journal for Hygienic Self-Help at Home], could have been included in the study, since the journal paid attention to hygiene and taking baths on several occasions. The editor of *Fylgia* was Elna Tenow. Tenow also contributed pieces to the magazine *Idun*, which part of the material studied. Identifying all texts is of course difficult to achieve, but a discussion of strengths and weaknesses of the

collection strategies used should have been included.

The conclusions are, in general, convincingly supported. Wiell's process tracking method serves to present the growth of the hygiene issue in a structured way, and how it gradually becomes an established ideology. However, Wiell could have done more to substantiate the links between the process chain described and the building of saunas in the first part of the twentieth century. The thesis makes clear, however, that political decisions regarding information campaigns on the benefits of saunas were made, but at the same time there seems to have been poor interest in financing the saunas. Consequently, we lack information of the motives behind many of the saunas built in the first half of the twentieth century. In the period 1920–1950 around 10,000 saunas were built, but there is only information on about 1,900 of them.

Admittedly, it is reasonable to assume that hygienism as the norm influenced the sauna building in the first half of the twentieth century, but other complementary or alternative explanations to the building of saunas could have been presented. For example, the argument of the link between elementary school and sauna building could have been explored further. The thesis makes clear that extensive hygiene investigations were conducted in elementary school. There was also a debate on the importance of teaching hygiene in elementary school. Considering the importance of elementary schools and teachers in the local community, the issue of the link between elementary schools and sauna building could have been further investigated. Lena Hammarberg's thesis *En sund själ i en sund kropp* (2001) partly treats the same problem area as Wiell does: hygienism and elementary school. Although Hammarberg has a fo-

cus on Stockholm, interesting comparisons would have been feasible. Likewise, links could have been made to history of education studies treating textbooks in science subjects. Magnus Hultén's study *Naturens kanon: formering och förändring av innehållet i folkskolans och grundskolans naturvetenskap 1842–2007* (2008) addresses, for example, the same textbooks as this thesis, but is not referred to in the thesis.

### Final remarks

I have raised some critical points regarding the thesis, for instance, the lack of certain important texts treating the hygiene issue. Even so, the thesis deals in an interesting way with a partly neglected aspect of economic history research on welfare facilities, namely the emergence of saunas. It may seem to be a peripheral phenomenon, but the thesis clarifies its actual scope. It is also interesting to see the building of saunas as a reflection of rural modernisation, a modernisation history that deserves attention. And even if the main aim of the thesis was not to study the role of education for the propagation and establishment of hygienism, I think that the thesis broadens our understanding of this link.

The thesis also contributes to the history of education regarding the role and mandates of schools. A recurring contemporary notion is that we must reinstate "knowledge at the centre" of attention in school, which it supposedly was in the early twentieth century. Through the reports and proposals studied in the thesis, a vision of a "school at the centre of the village" is instead evident, a school that was not only expected to foster God-fearing citizens but also healthy citizens. To this end, teaching about hygiene in health education was central.

The thesis may also inspire further studies of the theme hygienism and educa-

tion. A quick search shows that in some of the central government official reports, the issue of hygiene and health education is a recurring object of investigation, for instance in *Folkundervisningskommitténs betänkande*, Gösta Bagge's *Skolutredning* and *1946 års skolkommision*. In *Folkundervisningskommitténs betänkande II* it was argued that the hygiene issue "was one of the most important issues" to handle for the education system (p. 158). This is not to be understood as criticism of the thesis, rather that the area of hygiene and the modernisation of Sweden is far from 'a closed case.'

A Swedish language review of Wiell's dissertation will also be published in the journal *Historisk tidskrift*.

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