



Book Review

Hampus Östh Gustafsson
Folkhemmets styvbarn: Humanioras legitimitet i svensk kunskapspolitik 1935–1980

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The crisis of the humanities has been a recurrent theme in public as well as scholarly debate for quite some time. More often than not, the ones yelling crisis typically contrast the doom and gloom of today with some presumably golden age of the past. When writing history of the humanities, it is far too easy to fall into this narrative or deciding whether a crisis was “real” or not. In his dissertation *Folkhemmets styvbarn*, historian of science and ideas Hampus Östh Gustafsson manages to avoid these traps. He does take as his point of departure some of the recent discussions on the crisis of the humanities, but breaks with them and instead focuses on how the legitimacy of the humanities was challenged as a new regime of politics of knowledge in Sweden emerged and became predominant between 1935 and 1980. Rather than pointing out whether or when the humanities was in a crisis, the dissertation analyses the conditions under which a discourse of crisis emerged.

After a thorough introductory chapter, Östh Gustafsson addresses the main question on the changing legitimacy of the humanities in three chronologically ordered empirical chapters, followed by a concluding chapter. Although the author relies on a range of perspectives and concepts from the history and sociology of

science – historical narratives, sociology of expectations, boundary work – it is really the concept regime of legitimacy that stands out as novel and, above all, useful. The concept regime of legitimacy refers to the conditions under which science or a branch of science can obtain legitimacy in a particular order of politics of knowledge. Within such a regime, there are numerous strategies of legitimacy – an additional conceptual tool – any science could employ to gain legitimacy: anything from economic utility to national meaning making or cultural literacy. Hence, whether a given strategy successfully brings legitimacy or not always depends on the historical context.

Government commissions on university and research policy make up the main source material in the sense that they cover the entire period 1935–1980 and highlight moments of intensified debate. To sift through this comprehensive body of text, the author focuses on directives, discussions of aims and purposes as well as on the historical narratives in the commission reports. During moments of intensified debate, conference proceedings and programmatic articles in the press supplement the commission reports. In bringing this variety of sources together, the author makes a remarkably rich and colourful reconstruction of the discursive field in which the legitimacy of the humanities was at stake.

The dissertation focuses on the period from 1935 to 1980, which encompass the emergence and eventual decline of a regime of knowledge politics that rested on the tenet of rational

planning. The author points out three main characteristics of this regime: science should be legitimate in the eyes of the democratic public rather than the social elite; efficiency, rationality and planning were key principles for the politics of knowledge; and sciences were expected to contribute to the welfare state project. It emerged in the interwar years, especially the 1930s, and then consolidated in the 1940s, reached its height in the 1950s and 60s before starting to decline in the 1970s and 80s. Each empirical chapter is devoted to one of these three stages.

Within this new regime, and starting after its emergence in the 1930s, the humanities struggled to achieve legitimacy and instead became marginalised. This position was not so much due to lack of effort on behalf of the humanities' advocates, but more because they used dated or ineffective methods and arguments – their strategies of legitimacy – as well as making a virtue of their position in the margins. As a widened democratic public called for return of investments from a university system increasingly publicly governed and financed, the strategies of emphasizing *Bildung* and traditions, bestowing Sweden with international cultural prestige, or providing schools with teachers did little to heed such a call.

Later, when the regime of rational planning was approaching its height in the 1960s and 70s, the humanities slowly started to adapt. Yet, the way in which they adapted would still place them in a secondary position in the new regime. In a society of strong economic growth and technological development, the humanities would provide a cultural service to society.

That is, they were not integral to the narratives of the future of progress and development, but could still play a role as something of a luxury. This adaptive approach among the advocates of the humanities was about to change, however. In the final decades of the regime of rational planning, the humanities developed the role of the “gadfly”, emphasizing their critical-ideological mission and their defence of democracy. This is also the time when an explicit discourse of crisis develops among humanities scholars. To summarise the struggles of the humanities to fit with the new regime of knowledge politics, using Östh Gustafsson's words, “the main problem was that the humanities did not manage to formulate their own distinct contribution to the democratic welfare project, and previously successful strategies of legitimation did not seem compatible with the regime of rational planning” (p. 427).

In other words, the marginal position often associated with the humanities has been a constant theme throughout the knowledge political regime that dominated 1935–1980. The marginalisation moreover predates the crisis discourse, which is an interesting observation because it allows Östh Gustafsson to confront previous scholarship that typically attribute the crisis of the humanities to the critical movements of the late 1960s and 70s. This rebuttal of an all too common line of reasoning is, in my opinion, one of the main contributions this dissertation makes to the history of the humanities.

The dissertation also provides a number of substantive insights to the history of higher education. Chapter III, for example, covers the process

whereby the increasing enrolments at the faculties of liberal arts was identified as a problem of public concern. In short, the underlying question of why students continued to apply to humanities, an investment of little personal and societal economic utility, and its recurrent debates stigmatised humanities and its students as a problem for society. This problem was generated through the clash between students' actual demand for humanities and the ambitions of the governing bodies to steer students towards fields of study deemed more relevant to the development of the labour market. The author also makes an interesting connection between the plight of the humanities and the gradual transformation of higher education from a private to a public matter. As long higher education was a concern for a small elite paying their own tuition, the utility of the humanities, or any science for that matter, could be allowed to be anything. However, as soon as higher education becomes a public matter and financed with public means, the utility must be motivated. The author also suggests that this transition was accompanied by a loss of relative autonomy for the universities, who increasingly found themselves having to adhere to ideals of planning and democratic equality.

Another aspect, perhaps less central to the dissertation but nevertheless interesting to historians of higher education is the fact that the way Sweden dealt with the expansion at the height of the rational planning regime gained international reputation and praise. In addition, there are several gems placed throughout the text, such as the importance of educational and vocational

guidance both as a control function and channelling of students. Moreover, the reference to humanities programs as "Mrs. Degrees" ("hemmafrun med akademiska betyg", p. 246) at a conference in 1963 highlight the relevance of the ongoing discussion in sociology of education on gendered logics of social reproduction.

From the point of view of history of education, one might have anticipated more of a discussion with Gunnar Richardsson's *Kulturkamp och klasskamp* (1963) and its chapter on the question of Latin in the 1880s. Such a discussion would not alter the general argument nor the results of the dissertation. Instead, it would provide the reader with a glimpse into a time when the order was reversed in the sense that the humanities were at their height in terms of official legitimacy whereas the natural sciences had to overcome the prevailing idealist worldview to gain legitimacy in the upper echelons of the schooling system.

Overall, Östh Gustafsson's dissertation is a masterpiece whose contributions undoubtedly extend well beyond the field of history of science and ideas, in which it was defended. Östh Gustafsson focuses on the humanities as a whole, thereby distinguishing his dissertation from much research in the history of humanities (and social sciences) which tend to focus on individual or handful of disciplines. While this is a terrific manoeuvre in general, it is also called for by the specific subject matter, since the national politics of knowledge and its related discursive negotiations and renegotiations tended to treat the humanities as a monolith in comparison with natural sciences, or medicine.

In addition, the dissertation sets an example on how to study discourse in the history of (higher) education through developing concepts and demonstrating how to use them. It masterfully navigates back and forth between research and education, two entities typically considered in isolation when studied. As such, it provides a template for how to understand the development not just in the realm of knowledge producers but also in the realm of transmission of knowledge to future generations. By continuously comparing what happens to the humanities to not just the social sciences but to the sciences also, the dissertation shows that the plight of the humanities is not just about fitting or not fitting in a particular regime of legitimacy, but also about competing with other sciences for legitimacy.

To conclude, Östh Gustafsson's dissertation is incredibly rich in content while managing to stay focused and guide even the amateur historian of science and ideas safely through its many pages. It is, quite simply, a book well worth reading.

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