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Book Review

Kirsi Ahonen
Sharing the Treasure of Knowledge Nineteenth-Century Nordic Adult Education Initiatives and Their Outcomes
Tampere University (PhD diss.)
2022, 386 pp.

Kirsi Ahonen's dissertation *Sharing the Treasure of Knowledge* is a comparative study of the development of adult education in Sweden and Finland during the latter half of the 19th century up to the mid 20th century. The focus is on the first wave of adult education in the Nordics, and on innovative programs such as workers' institutes and academic lectures for the middle classes. As Ahonen rightly states, adult education was a local activity before large central adult education organizations arose in the 20th century. Liberal adult educational projects were developed in urban localities, and the dissertation sets out to compare the rise and effects of some liberal variants of adult education in Sweden and Finland. The starting point for comparison is the urban centers of Gothenburg and Tampere.

What is the main purpose of the comparative study? According to the author, it is 'to shed light on why the adult education at issue became important and what expectations were attached to it by discussing the ideas and intentions of the initiators' (17). In other words, it is a study that seeks to answer the question of why adult education became important. Furthermore, the study 'analyses the outcomes of the processes by discussing the status of the institutions in the respective surrounding localities' (17). Here Ahonen seeks to understand the development and effects of the programs.

Theoretically, the starting point is to study the emergence of adult education as a social innovation process. Social innovation is a theoretical program that has received some attention in recent years. A social innovation is an invention that can be clearly distinguished from scientific or business-related innovations, aiming to solve social problems. The three innovations studied are the emergence of public lectures in Gothenburg (The Free Academy) and the workers' institutes in Gothenburg and Tampere. Social innovation theory is used as a model of analysis that generates certain investigations on the innovation process, as well as on the effects of the innovations studied. Ahonen sets out to analyze the ideas that guided the actors, the processes through which the specific educational projects emerged and questions about the effects of the innovation process. These include the relationship between ideas and reality, how the institutions were able to survive (amongst others through economic conditions), and the effects the innovations had on the creation of active citizens.

Ahonen has explored a large and comprehensive source material from the three cases. These range from an extensive collection of meeting minutes and other organizational material to city council documents, parliamentary material, and newspapers from Finland

and Sweden. I am impressed by the large and careful work with such rich source material, not least because I know the hardships of studying the archives and meeting minutes of organizations. The author has applied what I would call a source pluralistic method to encircle the objects of study.

The results of the investigations are presented in three chapters. Chapter two deals with Gothenburg's Free Academy, a plan that supposed to implement academic lectures for women and men of the bourgeoisie from the 1860s onwards. A Free Academy never existed as an institution or organization. Instead, it was a program that was never realized or implemented. According to Ahonen, however, it is important to include and discuss the plan because there are traces of the program in later educational thinking in the case of Gothenburg. Ideas on the benefits of popular scientific lectures for the public were passed on and came to influence the creation of lecture series organized by Gothenburg University College. This kind of adult education, implemented by a university, came to influence cultural life in Gothenburg. An educated culture was established which also had social functions. Furthermore, the university took on a unique role as an adult educator in the form of university extension, which distinguished it from other Swedish cases or for that matter the British example, at the same time. Interesting as it is, I cannot help to wonder why this case was chosen. The investigation about the liberal newspaperman, parliamentarian, multitasker, Sven A. Hedlund, and his plans for a Free Academy is interesting. Yet, when reading I kept wondering: Why include the plans to conduct adult education for the bourgeoisie in Sweden when no similar case in Tampere is analyzed?

Chapter three begins with an overview of adult education in Gothenburg and Tampere. Primarily, the chapter deals with the program maker Edvard Wravinsky and the launch of the Workers' Institute in Gothenburg in 1883. Wavrinsky created the institute and ran it for three years. He managed to be politically involved with both the liberals and the social democrats, and he was a typical popular movement figure in the decades around the turn of the century in 1900. The impulses and ideas for the workers' institute were embedded in a liberal discourse in the 1870s and 1880s. Here there was both room for Anton Nyström's positivism and Wavrinsky's free church ideology. Ahonen studies the institute from the 1880s to the 1940s and discovers some interesting changes. For instance, the goal of the institute was to give the working-class access to learned and scientific education – which was seen as a route to develop independent thinking – but in the end, the education became more elementary. The institute was founded by private forces but eventually became dependent on public municipal grants. At the outset, the radical liberalism of the institute forced its agents to work under the radar of the municipal government. Gradually, however, the institute became part of the local political sphere and, by the early 1930s, it officially became a municipal institution. Because of the lack of sources regarding attendees of lectures and classes, as Ahonen discusses, it is hard to evaluate the outcome of the program.

Chapter four deals with the workers' institute in Tampere. The Tampere

case had its basis in a knowledge transfer from Sweden and Norway. It was a liberal workers' association that introduced the program, yet it was the conservative Finnish Club that created an institute in 1898. The goals were formulated in terms of raising the workers' self-awareness of their social situation alongside aims such as raising a more general level of education, giving the workers elementary education, and making them into citizens. As Ahonen discusses, civic education was not a goal in the Swedish case and it constituted a clear difference in comparison to the institute in Tampere. Another interesting difference was the organizational origins. The institution in Tampere was founded as part of the local municipal government and was subsidized by the city council. The conservatives saw an opportunity to fight socialism in a municipally controlled institute. It took some time before national government subsidies came to place. It was only a few years after the liberation from Russia that a more regular state subsidy system was implemented. Government grants covered approximately a quarter of the institute's costs. What effects did the institute have? Ahonen states that education accumulated both human capital and social capital. The workers were trained in, for example, bookkeeping and writing as well as in the practical skills of citizenship: speaking, debating and socializing with people of different social backgrounds and experiences. The author also shows that a significant part of the political representatives in Tampere, who were workers or belonged to the lower middle class, had, at one time, studied at the institute.

Ahonen's thesis gives us new knowledge of both a general and a specific nature. The choice to study adult education in their local urban environments is particularly successful. In my view, the most interesting result is the different organizational and economic conditions of the institutes and, therefore, how an educational program, the worker's institutes, was conditioned by specific historical conditions. However, there are of course, choices and lines of reasoning that can be discussed.

Although I see the comparative method as a new and highly welcomed contribution to the field of research, the comparison between the workers' institutes can be discussed. The aim of comparing three institutions in two different countries that stem from the same idea, yet arise a few decades apart, should not only be to show differences in implementation and outcome. It should also be to exhort general patterns of likeness. What similar patterns were present in the educational programs in Gothenburg and Tampere? For example, I would have been more interested in the agents that promoted non-vocational adult education for the bourgeoisie and the working classes. Did they share, for instance, similar educational and economic backgrounds?

Another discussion point, entwined with the comparative approach, is connected to the endgame of all comparisons: to explain similarities and differences. How can the different implementations of a similar pedagogical program be explained? Why are there so clear differences between the workers' institutes in Gothenburg and Tampere when it comes to organizational and economic conditions? I think, at least in part, that the

reasons why questions like these are not analyzed have to do with the choice of theory. Ahonen uses the theory of social innovations to analyze the development of educational programs. The theory, however, does have some limitations. A problem is that it is not historical or explanatory. Of course, there are researchers who, for example, look for the roots of various innovations – this is sometimes formulated as 'backtracking' – but non-presentist context-driven explanatory perspectives are not a part of the program. What role did the rise of a social democratic movement play in Sweden – the emergence of the Workers' Educational Association, and study circles – to explain why the liberal workers' institute failed? What role did the removal of government grants for public lectures in Sweden play? What role did historical circumstances such as Finland's civil war, the mobilization against socialism in Tampere play, and the fact that the institute was publicly owned? In short: What factors explain success and failure? Social innovation theory, alone, cannot help us understand this.

Despite this discussion point, I would like to emphasize that *Sharing the Treasure of Knowledge* is in many ways a refreshing work. Workers' institutes have been studied before, but now it is done from new starting points and with completely different ambitions. I also want to mention Ahonen's contribution to clarifying the structure of the formal education systems in Sweden and Finland, as well as the theoretical discussion around different terms to describe adult education – that is, the object of study. The main originality lies in the comparative Nordic perspective and that the researcher breathes new life into the study on workers' institute's organizational features. I hope *Sharing the Treasure of Knowledge* will inspire more comparative research on adult education and its organizational and economic conditions.

Anne Berg
Göteborg University
anne.berg@history.gu.se