

THE MAKING OF OLDER IMMIGRANTS IN SWEDEN: IDENTIFICATION CATEGORISATION, DISCRIMINATION.

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Introduction

The story here presented is a Swedish one, but only partly so. Some of the things I am going to discuss are indeed Swedish phenomena. A specific Swedish set of problems stems from a common understanding of a general economical decline in the public sphere, which in combination with a decreasing will to pay tax to solve other peoples problems, has resulted in restrictions and cut backs in welfare expenditures. The making of older immigrants is from the outset inscribed in this often told story: “money’s not enough anymore!” A result of this is a growing tendency to use public resources to solve acute problems, rather than to provide general and regular services. This leads to a more general, not only Swedish, set of problems which I will also address: discriminating practises that develop from making public resources available to certain marginalized “problematic” categories or groups, but only if they accept being stamped out as problematic, thus marginal. The effect of the acceptance of this labelling is affirmation and strengthening of the very same marginal position. It is often said that Sweden most likely is the country that has invested most in the integration of immigrants. The results, however, are meagre indeed. Integration of the recently immigrated population is not more successful in Sweden than elsewhere. One plausible reason for this is unforeseen counter-effects: the money spent on fighting discrimination on individual and group levels, has produced discriminating practices on a structural level.

The research programme “Culture of Ageing”

The empirical base of this paper is the research programme “The Culture of Aging”. This six year programme, led by the historian David Gaunt and myself, employed more than a dozen researchers from a number of disciplines. Together we set off to study as many aspects of ageing as a cultural phenomenon that we could think of. We studied dancing, music-making, narratives, food, clothes, old age in religious texts, the pensioners movements, representations and images of ageing, the struggles for old peoples right to work, and much more.¹ A number of studies were designed to deal specifically with the making of older immigrants in Sweden. We started by surveying the growing Swedish literature on the topic, and went on to investigate into how and why a number of old age care institutions in the Stockholm area

were established, institutions intended for immigrated Finns, Jews, Assyrians, Italians, and Greeks (Ponzio 1996, Ronström 1996). It is the results from these studies, conducted between 1993 and 1996, I will draw upon here.²

The study of Older Immigrants in Sweden: the beginnings

It was in the late 1970's that a public discussion about older immigrants started. The first research reports were published in the early 80's. In the 90's older immigrants had become firmly established in the public discourse as a specific social category, with its own set of problems that should and could be solved.

A significant part of the interest in older immigrants was raised by officials, authorities at different levels, from local to national. This is again a part of the Swedishness of this field. As noted by the leading scholars on immigration, a large part of Swedish official immigration policies has been induced from above, with little or no influence from the immigrants themselves (Hammar 1988:19, 1994:16). This means that both the power over the definitions of the problems, as well as the solutions, have been in the hands of Swedish authorities. A reason for this is that the whole field of "invandrare", the Swedish word for immigrant, has been created, shaped and developed by officials and researchers, in close co-operation. Much research has been initiated and paid by social authorities. A substantial part has been produced by professionals commuting between research, social work and social administration. In some cases the researchers and the officials have even been the same persons. Therefore it is not by chance that the researchers and the officials have had common interests, and common ways of thinking and talking to fall back upon.

It is also obvious how much of the research about older immigrants in Sweden that has been dominated by a social technological perspective, and by ideas about growing social problems and possible, but not yet found, solutions. This is a reason why research about older immigrants to such a large extent has focussed on social problems, loss, deprivation and so forth. Also evident among the producers of this research is social pathos, empathy, an eager to induce fast social improvement, a strong will to make the world better for everybody. This

¹ A list of reports from the research programme "The Culture of Ageing" is published in Hyltén-Cavallius 1999.

² See *Vem ska ta hand om de gamla invandrarna?* (Who is going to take care of the old immigrants?) Ronström Owe (red.) Rapport från forskningsprogrammet Åldrandets kultur nr 2. FoU rapport nr 1996:3. Socialtjänsten, Stockholm. A shorter version is Ronström, Owe 1996: *Äldre invandrare: från teori till praktik.* (Older immigrants – from theory to practice) *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift* 7-8, 1996.

important feature of the discourse about problematic social categories such as older immigrants follows directly from the social technological perspective.

No big surprise then, that the picture of older immigrants that has been built up during the last 20 years is dark. Older immigrants constitute a growing problem, not least because of their rapidly growing numbers. In 1996 there were about 110000 older immigrants in Sweden, about 7% of all people over 65. In 2010 it is estimated that the numbers will have doubled. Most of the old immigrants come from neighbouring countries in Europe, but the number of immigrants from further afield is growing fast. Generally, older immigrants are depicted as having bad health, low incomes, low living standards and life expectancies. One of the greatest problems, maybe even the greatest, according to a widespread picture is that older immigrants speak little or no Swedish, and thus, as the standard Swedish expression has it, “live outside society”. This has to do with the common tendency in Sweden to translate the widely used concept ‘culture’ into ‘language’. Bad Swedish is seen as a mark of non-Swedishness. It is because immigrants speak bad Swedish that they are not fully integrated, and it is because they are not fully integrated that they continue to speak bad Swedish. Swedish language is understood as the main entrance to Swedish society and Swedish culture.³ Thus a proficient Swedish speaking person will be considered Swedish, integrated into Swedish culture. This is an important reason behind investing so much in language courses for immigrants, and for treating low proficiency in Swedish language as a main social and cultural problem.

The making of new social categories

Producing new social categories is a complicated process with its own inherent logic. This is how it is often done in Sweden: First you establish the fact that there is a certain group or category with a specific set of problems. Then you state that the number of people belonging to this group or category is increasing. The next step is to declare that we know too little, that nothing yet is done, and, of course, that something should, could and must be done. The point of departure is a growing social problem, the goal is to find the right means to solve the problems. There seem to be little space for questions and reflections in-between these positions.

³ See for example the discussion in Sjögren & Runfors & Ramberg 1996

Looking back on this problem-driven production of social categories, it is not hard to see that the struggle for social reforms and improvements, for making life better for deprived people, in combination with often very strong social engagement and feelings of solidarity among the active social workers and officials, in effect often has led to a simple patronising of the clients. It is paradoxical how easily a strongly stressed cultural relativism and anti-ethnocentrism could be integrated into a “von oben” perspective, from which the identified marginalized groups could be patted on their heads.

What we stand in front here is the Janus-face of altruism: the two sides of “all what you want people to do to you, you should also do to them”. Fundamentally, to help, to take care of somebody, starts with establishing a normality, according to which one part is seen as dependent on the other. It proceeds by identifying what the helper, if in the same situation, would like to be helped with, and finally goes on to secure that the person in need, the dependant, will get precisely that. It is the helper that controls the identification of the person in need, as well as the identification of what he or she needs. When combining two marginalised social categories, as ‘old people’ and ‘immigrants’, into a doubly marginalised new category, ‘older immigrants’, it is all too easy that the necessary reflections give way to the ready answers that starts with “we got to do something immediately, else it soon will be too late!”

New perspectives

What answers are there then to the question why “older immigrants” was invented as a social category in the late seventies and early eighties? The first and simplest answer is of course that the numbers of old immigrants increased radically during this period. Before they were few – thus small problem. Then their numbers grew – and so did the problem of how to deal with them. A second answer along the same line of reasoning is that not only have they become more numerous, their problems have also increased, and become more severe. Most studies of older immigrants have departed from these standpoints.

These answers, however, are far too simple. Growing numbers and problems may be necessary conditions, but there is more to it than that. People from many places have lived in Sweden for centuries. A good reason for why the numbers of old immigrants in Sweden seem to have grown during the last decades may well be the simple fact that we up to then did not bother to count them! All these people have grown old in Sweden, and all have had their

problems. Still it is not until the late seventies that they have become identified as a problematic social category. In fact, several ethnic groups, among them Finns, Estonians and Jews, have strived for years to organise care systems for “their” elderly (Karupää 1994, Ronström 1996). Up to the 1970’s, only the Jews had succeeded. Why?

Another approach is to look for answers in other directions. One has to with the way officials in the social security institutions work. A central part of their work is to identify problematic groups, investigate into their problems and than to solve them. For all kinds of professionals, developing their work as professionals is of fundamental importance. For social workers one of the ways to develop their profession is to identify new groups of people hitherto unknown to the officials as in need for their services (Arnstberg 1989). When such a new group has been identified and categorised, the social and cultural “contents” of that group will develop as a result of a complex interplay between the categorizers and the categorized. The process is often characterised by “alter casting” (Weinstein & Deutschberger 1963, Lange & Westin 1981), where the dependant part is moulded in a form created for them by the categorizers.

Yet another viable explanation is compatibility: there are older immigrants in other countries, (which in the Swedish context most often should be read the USA), so, although we might not yet be aware of it, there must be older immigrants also in Sweden. A variation on the same theme is when seemingly successful institutional solutions to specific social problems in other countries are imported as models also for the solutions of problems in Sweden. An example of this is the introduction of the Greek KAPI⁴ in Sweden during the 1990’s.

A fourth type of explanation has to do with a change in the patterns of social categorisation in Sweden as a whole (and, as it seems, not only in Sweden, but also in many other countries in the Western world). There seem to be a general move away from class-based to ethnically based social categorisations (cf Lundberg, Malm & Ronström 2000).

Another way to approach the question why older immigrants was invented as a new social category is to think with Ivan Illich and many others, who have pointed to the simple fact that all systems in a sense produce their users. When there is a system for distributing resources to older immigrants, there will be older immigrants asking for these, and precisely these,

⁴ Greek abbreviation for Kèndra Anìktìs Prostaías Ilikiomènon (“Centra for open care of the elderly”)

resources. If we from this perspective look back to the question why there since twenty and more years exist a social category called “older immigrants” in Sweden, the possible answers must be found by not looking too much in the direction of the fingers that point at older immigrants.

Instead it is necessary to turn around and look at those who the pointing hands belong to. What forty years of gerontological research has shown, writes anthropologist Christine Fry 1990, is that the elderly belong to the most heterogeneous parts of the populations in industrialised societies. People are born different, no two people live the same lives. Therefore people accumulate differences through their lives, and will become increasingly unique the older they get: “The longer they are here the more time they have to experience life and to become increasingly unique physically, psychologically, and culturally (Fry 1990:129). Once this is accepted, it will be obvious that the answer to the necessary question why people, when growing old, albeit their inherent differences, become treated as more and more similar, cannot be found among the aged. Instead, as Fry urges us, we should investigate into those social and cultural factors that shape the way people make a living (Fry 1990:129).

To these factors belong a structure where certain people, as professionals, with the best of intentions and the best of reasons, make a living from identifying, categorising and also potentially discriminating marginalised groups. A closer look at the material generated through our studies, reveals that a small number of key actors are constantly recurring. They are often middle aged, with university education, often in sociology, social work and the like. They are trained to lead, to take initiatives, and have often worked with social questions, care, social policies for many years. They take great personal interest in immigrant and old age issues, and, not least important, they are in position to assemble large public resources for that purpose.

Older immigrants?

Here it is necessary to dwell somewhat also upon the question of what “older immigrant” is. From the perspective of the studies we have been conducting, age and ethnicity can be described as two differently constructed ‘frames’ for categorisation. They are not only different, but also have a tendency to compete with each other. Both are widespread, widely used, and therefore pregnant with meaning. What happens when they are combined? Theoretically there are some different possibilities. One is that the old age aspect becomes

dominant, while the immigrant aspect, ethnicity, becomes subordinate. The other is of course the other way around: age becomes a part of the overriding ethnic aspect. A third possibility is that a new “older immigrant” category with traits from both is established, as in the American concept “eth-elders” (Driedger & Chapell 1987). A fourth is that the old immigrants does not fit into any existing category, neither based on age nor on ethnicity. Therefor old immigrated individuals end up in a conceptual vacuum and become socially and culturally invisible.

As far as we have been able to see, in Sweden today there is substantial empirical support for all four possibilities. An example of the first is the older immigrants’ contacts with the health and care systems. A founding principle in Swedish welfare policies is to treat all citizens equally, which in Sweden as a rule has been translated to “in the same way”. As a result, there is a well established practice with strong ideological support to treat old people as fundamentally the same, irrespectable of origin and need. Hence, the immigrant/ethnic aspect is subordinated under the age aspect. The second possibility, where the age aspect is subordinated and the ethnic aspect is accentuated, can be exemplified with Poles, Hungarians and other immigrants groups in Sweden, which have no specific activities geared towards “their” old people. Instead they have tended to treat the aged as an integral part of the ethnic communities. An example of the third, the amalgamation of age and ethnicity into a new category, can be exemplified by some ethnically based pensioners organisations, and some homes and institutions for non-Swedish elderly. In Rinkeby, a suburb in north Stockholm, there is a home for the aged, where people of mostly Hispanic origins have spontaneously moved in. Here, according to a recent dissertation based on field work at this institution, it seems as new meanings of “old immigrant” is being lived out (Olsson 1975). Examples of the fourth possibility may at first be harder to find, because of the resulting invisibility. But it is a fact that many immigrated old people are estranged from Swedish pensioners associations, do not want to live in Swedish institutions for the aged, and at the same time for different reasons choose to stay out of the social networks and institutions formed by their compatriots. Studies point to such problems among for example Kurds, Iranians, Finns and Swedes from Finland (Songur 1992, Hajjghasemi 1994, Heikkilä 1994, 1996). Many of these immigrants have come individually to Sweden, lived their whole lives without much contact with the Swedish welfare system, or the organisations of their fellow countrymen. For people estranged from the Swedish society in which they have spent most of their lives, and who do not find the

imagined community with fellow “ethnics” strong enough, the consequences in later life might be frightful.

Summary and conclusion

It seems as in Sweden today old age is becoming increasingly ethnicised, or if you wish, that ethnicity has achieved an increasingly strong age aspect. Many ethnic groups are now on their way to identify “their elders” as a special category. Swedish authorities have set up special solutions to meet the special needs and problems of older immigrants. A growing number of researchers have done their best to explore this new social category. But at the same time also Swedish pensioners, through their organisations, have started to display themselves publicly as group “with their own culture”, by using the same expressive and rhetorical means and models that since long have been used for the same purposes by ethnic groups. Thereby Swedish pensioners in a sense also have become increasingly “ethnicised”.

What are the possible reasons behind this ethnification of old age? One is of course that this simply is what everybody has wanted all the time, but not until now has been able to carry out. Another is that it is what some has wanted, and successfully achieved, and therefore others have begun to take after. This is a version of domino-theory presented in Ernest Gellners famous work about nations and nationalisms: If one starts, others have to follow or simply disappear (Gellner 1987). A third is that although there have always been older immigrants, it is not until recently that we have discovered them, which of course is a prerequisite for taking any steps at all to improve their situation. A fourth is that is not until recently that we have invented, or constructed, older immigrants as a socially and culturally relevant category.

In our research support for all these explanations can be found, the first two mostly among representatives of the immigrants’ organisations and Swedish social officials, the latter two more commonly among researchers. But, as a conclusion, it seems that whatever the explanation, old immigrants themselves have played only a very small part of the production and dissemination of the concept “older immigrants”. Instead it seems as though the concept, as well as the ongoing ethnification of old age/aging of ethnicity in Sweden as whole, primarily is a result of the efforts of Swedish officials and researchers. From this perspective you could view a large part of the resulting “multicultural Sweden” and “the ethnics” in Sweden, not as an answer to growing diversity, due to immigration of new foreigners, but

instead as an arrangement of the ruling elite, to make it possible to uphold its ruling functions in society.

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