

## A Public Library Dilemma

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I would claim that issues concerning social and economic class are generally not considered relevant in regards to our public libraries. Social class is looked upon as something political whereas libraries profess themselves to be neutral and non-political. Swedish society is experiencing mounting and apparent divides and fragmentation on the basis of income, education, employment and the opportunity to influence once own life. It is becoming more difficult to transcend differences and/or bring down borders between those who have and those who have not. The course of this development is evident. The central government authority for official statistics, Statistics Sweden (SCB), surveyed the changes in living conditions of 112 404 informants aged between 20 and 84. The study was called ULF and surveyed welfare areas such as work environment, housing, economy, health, leisure, assets, civic involvement, social relations, employment, transportation, communication, safety/security and education. This is upsetting reading. The growing divide permeates all these areas. A government inquiry, in Sweden called SOU, named '*Welfare in Sweden: The Balance Sheet for the 1990s*' also constitutes worrying reading along the same lines. What is being presented seems indisputable even to those belonging to a conservative or politically right persuasion, and therefore would not support a class analysis. The same trend is prevalent in Swedish public libraries. We are experiencing a general decrease in visitors and loans. But the decrease is generally even greater among groups less educated and well off. And this divide in usage is growing. Are the libraries providing what is needed and requested? The relevance of public libraries and our services are doubted. This is the environment, this is the society, where we are to run good public libraries, open to all.

That which I will be calling a 'public library dilemma' could also be described as a dilemma or a paradox of culture politics. In an attempt to show what I mean by this dilemma I will reference the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. In one of Bourdieu's studies he shows a black and white photograph of an older woman's worn down and broken down hands to people shaped by different economical, social and cultural circumstances. What soon becomes apparent is that those lacking in higher education and an expressed interest in arts and culture seldom gives any esthetical comments or judgements on the photograph. Their comments are social – 'that old woman's work must have been punishing'. One speaks from experience rather than aesthetics. Among those with a greater experience of established fine arts and culture the comments were very different – 'it reminds me of at painting that I saw at an exhibit of Spanish art'. The same photograph is given different meanings and form through the observer's different experiences, circumstances and living conditions. It is the same photograph but a very different picture. A person's relationship to legitimate culture and her education-, lifestyle- and taste choices becomes the story of who she is and where she comes from. There are undeniably many such stories. It is very problematic that these stories are befallen by one social group's interests, tastes and historically specific manifestations that are then made into something more or less universally valid. I'm talking about the self

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proclaimed standardizing rule of good taste. One declare once own taste to be the proponent of universally good quality at the expense of the Other's common taste, that is made into the established taste's opposite.

The well educated 'democratic' elite have a need to give to others what they themselves have. The dilemma can be described as follows: there is a will to reach everyone, even the lower classes, with a vast range of legitimate culture. There is often a well intended strive for the making of a better society and greater equality. But the lower common classes – the others – don't necessarily want this legitimate culture because they are shaped by different living conditions and points of reference. The Swedish sociologist Mats Trondman expresses the core of the dilemma as follows, 'he wants to give to those that do not have, but those that do not have do not want it, because they don't have the conditions to want it'. To change ones taste is to change ones life. The presence of legitimate culture in certain environments can expose social and cultural distinctions and affirm experienced distance and alienation. An example of this is Paul Willis's classic study 'Learning to Labour' that shows how a group of boys through clothes, truancy and smoking etcetera use the gang as a counter identity in relation to their teachers and middle class values. They develop a counter school-culture where school is for others, not for them.

Is the individual self-improvement project then all that remains? I have heard and read stories in which the public library was where the foundation for class journeys was laid and where self improvement was done. There is a reoccurring theme in these stories of escape and the individual overcoming or transcending his/her living conditions. One escapes ones conditions but those conditions remain the same for those left behind. Can the public library only be of help to the individual exception or could our services be a social force that could make a difference for whole communities and society as a whole? The recently deceased sociologist Iris Marion Young's theories on justice and what she calls the 'good society'/'the good life' shows the great significance of people being able to influence their lives and act as active agents. She says that classes and class differences exist; submission and domination are each other's prerequisites and emphasize, in no uncertain terms, the importance of civic involvement and the importance of arenas/places for civic participation. A good life is, according to Iris Marion Young, when the individual is able to develop and practice her own capacities and freely express her experiences. People must define their good life themselves. This demands that people can participate, contribute to and influence the powers and contexts that impact their everyday life and actions. The public library must be or become such a context. To be able to be involved in these settings/contexts the person must experience a sense of freedom and a sense of not being dependant on well intending groups or individuals. Justice is possible only when people are able to represent themselves. A consequence of this is that a supposed majority can't regulate and dominate the other, the minority. Young's way of using justice as a starting point and her way of interpreting human beings as contributing active agents has led me to experience her texts as liberating. I believe that the public library should learn and be influenced by her liberating perspectives when trying to break free from the confinement of the public library dilemma.