



## History Wars in Sweden? A syllabus debate about nation, history, and identity

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**ABSTRACT:** History teaching and learning in schools has been the subject of history culture wars in countries such as Sweden, Australia, the US, and Canada. In a Swedish-specific context, this and similar debates should be viewed in relation to the fact that throughout the twentieth century, governments in Sweden, as well as other countries, have regarded history teaching in schools as an important builder of national consciousness. At the same time, Sweden has undergone substantial demographic changes in recent decades. This article analyzes the different perspectives put forward in a debate on the school subject of history in Swedish education as a new syllabus was being introduced. Seixas' approaches to history are used in the analysis. The debate was initiated by historians who criticized the syllabus for the absence of the period of Antiquity. Leading politicians also participated. The collective memory approach was a central perspective on history in schools in the debate.

**KEYWORDS:** History Wars; Social Studies Wars; Identity; Nation; Curriculum.

### Introduction

Antiquity is the cradle of Western civilization. The Middle Ages are a key process through which Sweden became a country: cities were built, our country was Christianized and trade with merchants and money grew. For me it is inconceivable that these parts should be removed from teaching in schools. I can assure those who are worried about this change that it will not be approved by the government. (Björklund, 2010a, p. 2)

The citation is taken from the political and educational discussion that started with the launch of a new syllabus in history for compulsory education (Lgr 11) and a critical article by famous Swedish historian, Dick Harrison.<sup>1</sup> The Swedish Minister for Education, Jan Björklund, made clear that one of the presumed key tasks of history teachers has been and still is to foster all students into a national, and to some extent, Western identity.<sup>2</sup> This fostering should be done through a transmission of crucial parts in older national and to some extent European history. Antiquity, the Middle Ages, Christianity and trade were themes in this narrative of how 'Sweden became Sweden'.

The collective memory approach to history teaching, which Björklund advocated, has a long tradition in Sweden and other countries, but has also been under pressure in a globalized world (Carretero, Rodríguez-Moneo & Asensio, 2012; Seixas, 2007; Evans, 2004; Taylor, 2010; Olofsson et al. 2017; Samuelsson & Wendell, 2016). The controversy surrounding history syllabi has been intense internationally, as well as in Sweden, and can be described as a kind of history and culture wars set of debates. They should be viewed in the context of governments in Sweden and other countries, throughout the twentieth century,

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regarding school history teaching as an important builder of national consciousness (Nakou & Apostolidou, 2010; Barton, 2012a; Grever, 2012; Ahonen, 2001; Åström Elmersjö, 2013). At the same time, Sweden (and other nations) has undergone substantial changes in recent decades. The ethnically homogenous Swedish classroom of yesterday is not uncommonly a multicultural one today. It is above all in the past 40 years that immigration to Sweden has increased. Presently, 20% of the population is of foreign origin. (Löden, 2008; Eliasson & Nordgren, 2016) This development posed a challenge to history in school, as became clear in Sweden with the presentation of the proposed new syllabus for history.

This article analyzes the role of history teaching in a national school system that has to accommodate an increasingly multicultural group of students. This article relates this development to the political ambition of having a historical canon in the age of accountability. More specifically, this article analyzes the different perspectives put forward in the debate on the history subject in Swedish education and the debaters' premises. The analysis is also related to an international context. Two research questions are posed in relation to the debaters' argumentation: (1) What was seen as the overriding purpose of the history subject? (2) What content was seen as central to history teaching?

## Research context

The interest in the relationship between national identity and history has had a central position in historiography for a long time. On this issue, Berger & Conrad (2015) show that methodological nationalism has become prominent in recent years. The statement made by the Swedish Minister for Education, Jan Björklund, and the subsequent debate about the role of history in school can be seen as part of the general trend in the Western world, in which national history is challenged and discussed in a multicultural society (Nordgren & Johansson, 2015; Seixas, 2007; Myers, 2006). This trend, as well as other controversies regarding syllabi content, is reflected in the debate analysed here.

According to Parkes (2007), Symcox (2002), and Éthier & Lefrançois (2012), the struggle over history education can also be seen as a *culture war*, *history curriculum war* or *memory war* about national identity. Similar trends are also found in countries such as Scotland (Hillis, 2010), Canada (Éthier & Lefrançois, 2012), and Australia (Taylor, 2010; Parkes, 2007), where changes in history syllabuses have resulted in intense debates about national identity and about whose history should be included in the outcomes, objectives, and/or content of the curriculum. The question also arises of how particular historical events such as the World War II in Estonia (Potapenko, 2010), 18th century colonization of Australia (Taylor, 2010; Parkes, 2007), or the battles between the British and the French in Québec should be represented (Éthier & Lefrançois, 2012).

According to Barton (2012b), it can be precarious to draw too close a parallel between the public debates in various countries and their different systems of education and historical traditions. However, the debates still seem to share general features indicating that the organization, content and purpose of history and its related school subjects such as social studies have been the object of history wars.

One conflict has revolved around how teaching should be organized and conducted in countries such as Sweden, Australia, USA, and Canada, where some progressive educators have advocated a coherent and subject-integrated curriculum with an overall teaching aim of educating students to be critical and reflective citizens. The critics of this system have emphasized the need for social instruction based on the outlook and methods of a particular subject.

Another conflict area has been the content of teaching. Somewhat oversimplified, it is possible to see a group of debaters advocating national narratives as well as teacher-led education and proper historical facts as constituting the key to good civics. The glorious past of a nation should be the focus of attention. Opponents of this perspective emphasize contemporary relevance and the need to adopt problem-based approaches in the classrooms. Examples of this are to be found in Argentina, the USA and Sweden (Taylor & Guyver, 2012; Evans, 2004; Stearns, 2010; Karlsson, 2009).

Barton (2012b) also points out that the occurrence of public history wars does not mean that the conflicts reach classroom level. Rather, he suggests that, 'This war, then, exists almost entirely at a rhetorical level' (2012b, p. 196). Referring to the USA, Barton claims that teachers have to handle the differences between the perspectives in the classroom on a daily basis. Similarly, Taylor and Guyver suggest that history wars can be viewed simply as public debates on the purpose of history, constituting 'politicized controversies that frequently surround societal imaginings and depictions of national, cultural, racial, ethnic, tribal and religious pasts' (2012, p. xii).

The article focuses on the public debate, not on how teachers actually deal with these issues.

### **Analytical premises**

To analyze the perspectives on history that feature in the debate more specifically, in the main concepts and perspectives from North-American theories are drawn on for this article. Researchers such as Bruce VanSledright, Peter Seixas and Stéphane Lévesque have been active in an American context where questions about multiculturalism, nation, history, and identity have been intensely debated for a long time. But this question is of great relevance to a formerly homogeneous country such as Sweden that is now turning into a more multicultural nation.

Scholars have developed a broad perspective on different views of history where questions about history and identity in a multicultural world are central. Peter Seixas (2007) and others see three general perspectives on history in schools: the collective memory approach, the disciplinary approach and the postmodern approach.

*The collective memory approach* emphasizes identity in different communities. Collective memory is a type of social memory connected to different groups, such as social classes, families, associations or trade unions. In this kind of memory individuals are connected to a larger group. In history as it is taught in schools, the nation is usually the community in focus. The role of school history, in a collective memory approach, is to tell a grand national narrative in which different events, ideas and persons are parts of the development from the past to current society. Education can hereby contribute to social cohesion and citizenship (Barton, 2012a; Seixas, 2007; VanSledright, 2011; Lévesque, 2008; Assmann & Conrad, 2010; Aronsson, 2012). Often the collective memory approach emphasizes a common Western cultural heritage.

According to a *disciplinary approach* on history teaching in schools, the perspective of the academic discipline is of importance (Seixas, 2000, 2007; Evans, 2012). This perspective is built on a scientific, discipline specific approach to history. Seixas emphasizes that the student should be taught conceptual tools and methods that are used in the discipline, for instance, strategies for criticizing and evaluating sources. Students should be able to ask critical questions about events, people, and institutions of the past. They should also learn how to investigate differences and similarities between various groups. Using this approach, there is no simple right or wrong in history, instead the complexity of people and events in history are

studied through sources. According to Seixas, the approach presents a way of educating critical citizens. Through their training in historical method, replicating the work of historians, students receive tools needed to orient themselves in a complex world (Seixas, 2007).

Contemporary *postmodern perspectives* on history teaching include postmodern as well as intercultural perspectives. In educational theories and curricula there are features of a more postmodern and critical perspective on history as a discipline and on history as taught in school. According to Peter Seixas (2007) and Keith Jenkins (2002), a crucial problem in history teaching based on *one* national narrative is that there is a lack of consensus about what the content of such a narrative should be.<sup>3</sup> One argument is that historical narratives and knowledge are connected to different political and ideological interests. This ideological interest is hidden behind the rhetoric that there is an objective and neutral truth about the past. In a postmodern approach, Eurocentric and grand national narratives are challenged and the main role of history here is not to homogenize students into a common national identity. Different identities and cultures are regarded as equally important. The main purpose of teaching history is to facilitate the student's narrative competence and historical consciousness. The student's own questions (and experiences) are important (Seixas, 2000; 2007; Jenkins, 2002). Even if it is not explicitly stated, it is reasonable to expect that modern history acquires a central position as teaching is shaped by students' interests and their questions about the past. This perspective can be understood as a new view of school history, possibly as a result of the insecurity of a monolithic common historical identity in contemporary multicultural society (Karlsson, 2011; Rösen, 2011; Nordgren, 2011).

### **History as a school subject in the twentieth century: Developments and areas of debate in Sweden**

Sweden has a long tradition of a common national compulsory curriculum for all students. Since the 1960s, all students have had the same syllabus in primary schools. Previous curricula, from the early 1900s, were oriented towards a collective memory approach (Englund, 1986; note that Englund does not use the term collective memory). However, the specific aspects of the discipline became more important in the 1960s because of an emphasis on objectivity and scientific ideals. Although a particular historical canon was included in the Syllabus, it has historically emphasized the students' own interests and experiences as important starting points in teaching (Ludvigsson, 2009; Ammert, 2013).

In 1994, a new curriculum (Lpo 94) was introduced in Sweden, which was a specific syllabus for history, but from 2000 there was also an interdisciplinary social studies syllabus, which included religious studies, civics, history and geography. Teachers could choose between teaching according to a subject-specific approach, and taking an integrated approach to social studies. This curriculum was introduced by a Social Democratic government (Larsson, 2001). In Lpo 94 there was no specified core content or standards. The idea was to decrease state control over the content. In theory, Sweden provided an open curriculum, allowing the teacher to decide on content and method in discussion with the students. The Syllabus, however, was criticized for the absence of specific content, by the new right wing government in 2009 (Regeringsbeslut I:1 2009). During this period, there were also articles and debates on the 'crisis of history' (and the 'crisis in school') with a focus on students' lack of knowledge in the context of the reduction of teaching hours for history in Sweden (Hallström, Martinsson & Sjöberg, 2012; Samuelsson, 2014; Elgström & Hellstenius, 2011; Larsson, 2001).

### **‘School creates historical illiterates’**

Jan Björklund was a leading person in the social-liberal Liberal People’s Party, but he distinguished himself as politically conservative in regard to the role of religious studies, for example, and the character and role of the history as a school subject.<sup>4</sup> In 2001, Björklund published an article, titled ‘School creates historical illiterates’ in one of Sweden’s leading newspapers, in which school in general and history teaching in particular were criticized for the lack of a national canon. He also stated that history ‘provides a cultural identity, which functions as the glue that binds us together in our social community’. In the article, Björklund connected a general declining school system to the status enjoyed by history as a school subject and pointed out that there “is no doubt about the fact that the educational politics aiming to erase our shared educational heritage and creating historical illiterates can only be described as intellectual treason against the coming generations” (Björklund, 2001, p. 2). The article also rejected the idea that history should be integrated into a larger social studies subject.

When Björklund was appointed Minister for Schools in 2006 (and Minister for Education in 2007), a number of reforms were initiated. Grading was introduced earlier, namely in year 6 instead of year 8. The standard-based system was also emphasized with the introduction of core content. National tests were also introduced in new subjects, including history. The development of more tests and clearer curricula in Sweden can also be related to the school reforms in Sweden and other countries where accountability became a crucial principle (Evans, 2012).

All in all, the reforms adopted in Sweden are not unique to this country. In other parts of the world a nationally-oriented history was also increasingly being introduced in schools, or at least declared desirable in debates (Nakou & Apostolidou, 2010; Taylor, 2012; Evans, 2004). When the National Agency for Education’s proposal for a new curriculum became public in 2010, there were expectations, particularly from Björklund and other debaters, that a more canon-oriented curriculum, ascribing a more important role to earlier history, would be the result.<sup>5</sup>

### **Material and methods**

Other studies of Swedish history in public space have shown, for instance, how politicians use the media and history for political gain (see, for example, Zander, 2001). It is also in the context of reforms and changes of curricula that different perspectives of the subject become especially tangible in public debates (Goodson, 2004; Ongstad, 2004). Daily newspapers should therefore be a good source for capturing the public debate on history and perspectives of history.

The main sources in this article are from the media and from the National Agency for Education. There are two types of agency sources: the curriculum proposal circulated for comments, published late in 2009; and the final Syllabus in history published in the spring of 2011.

The research that informed the project that this article is drawn from, is partly informed by publically available media reports, mainly from newspapers. In the main, reports and editorials from the four major national newspapers in Sweden: *Dagens Nyheter*, *Svenska Dagbladet*, *Aftonbladet*, and *Expressen* were collected throughout 2010. In 2012, reports and editorials from the approximately 30 Swedish regional newspapers available via the *Media Artchive*, a library research resource, were also included in the research data collection.<sup>6</sup> With the implementation of the Syllabus taking place in October, 2010, it was included for debate

and discussion in three out of four national newspaper editorials. In the regional press, nine out of around thirty editorials discussed the Syllabus. *Radio Sweden*, the public service broadcaster for radio, also had programs commenting on the Syllabus. Politicians (such as Jan Björklund, Minister for Education), teachers in upper secondary school and university scholars in history, art history, and archaeology also participated in the debate. Typical statements made by different actors and perspectives are included for analysis in this article. The analysis of the material sought to identify attitudes expressed in the media reports towards the curriculum, primarily whether they were positive or negative to the proposal. Also of interest was what (if indeed any) explicit basic arguments justified this attitude, as well as implicit premises or assumptions obvious in the media reports. Finally, the analysis was linked to Seixas' (2000, 2007) theoretical concepts. The categories have been constructed through abduction, combining the theory with the empirical data in the analysis (Bryman, 2012).

### **‘Antiquity is the cradle of Western civilization’: The draft**

In late 2009, a draft of a new history syllabus was developed. The National Agency for Education commissioned an expert group to write it (note that this is the way Syllabuses are usually developed in Sweden). The group was led by scholars with a history education approach. Theoretically, the scholars were inspired by the historical consciousness perspective and by intercultural theories. But, it is also important to note that there were expectations, particularly from Björklund, of a more canon-oriented curriculum ascribing a more important role to earlier history.

In the draft circulated for comments all Syllabuses had the same structure: an introduction which contained the reasons and aims for teaching the subject in different school forms; the *aim and the long-term goals* of teaching in the subject are given; and the *core content* states what the teaching should cover.

In the 2009 draft, part of the overall aim of history was described as follows:

Man's understanding of the past is interwoven with beliefs about the present and perspectives of the future. In this way, the past affects both our lives today and our choices for the future. Women and men throughout the ages have created historical narratives to interpret reality and shape their surroundings. A historical perspective provides us with a set of tools to understand and shape the present we live in. (Skolverket remiss [draft] 2010, p.41, translation Eliasson et al.)

This was not the focus of the debate; rather the core content for years 7–9 was intensely discussed.<sup>7</sup> In comparison to the earlier Syllabus, this was what was new. This core content was a type of mandatory standardized knowledge. In the Syllabus, the core content included themes from prehistoric times to the present world, but it was mainly early history that was the topic of debate. The first draft had the following content for the period titled *Ancient civilizations from prehistoric times to 1700*:

Comparisons between some early civilization growth and development until the 1700s, for example, in Asia and America.

Some early Mediterranean cultures and the importance of their ideas and ideals for contemporary society.

What historical sources from some early civilization, such as Asia or America, can tell about similarities and differences in living conditions for children, women and men. (Skolverket remiss 2010, p. 44)

Note that ancient history was a part of the core content in relation to a ‘use of history perspective’, stating: “Some concepts, such as ancient times, the interwar and post-war periods as well as different views of their meanings”. (Skolverket remiss [draft] 2010, p. 45)

## **Government stops the syllabus in history': The debate starts**

In the debates, a different perspective on the uses and purposes of history was highlighted. The connection between past and present societies was in focus, or rather, what was understood as a lack of attention to the connections between the past and contemporary society. Apart from a few supporters of the Syllabus, participants in the debate highlighted the importance of the ancient period and the Middle Ages, though not always explicitly connected to a nationalist perspective on history. The 'cradle of civilization argument' recurred in almost all articles. The argument was that the cultural, political and historical roots of Sweden and the Western world could be traced to Antiquity, as the articles by Björklund and Harrison below demonstrate.

### ***The dominance of the collective memory approach***

The statement that the roots of a so-called united, *our* national society were in ancient Greece had a crucial role in the debate. The exclusion of ancient Greece from the Syllabus threatened the connection to this vital part of the nation's identity. Explicit or implicit history in schools had a crucial role in giving Swedish students an identity rooted in a Western tradition built on values from ancient Greece. Additionally, the nation's link to Christianity was emphasised. However, there were significant differences as the debate contained two collective memory approaches, emphasizing various aspects of a shared past.

### ***'Christianity, Islam and Judaism have the same cultural roots': An additional collective memory approach***

According to a group of scholars and other participants in the debate, the absence of early history and of different cultures could lead to racism, ethnocentrism, and chauvinism. By studying both our own and other cultures, students could receive tools to handle a modern globalized and multicultural world. I call this perspective an additional collective memory approach.<sup>8</sup> Scholars and editors of liberal-oriented newspapers had this perspective on history. It is not always possible to make a sharp distinction between some of the scholars presented here and the opinion-makers beneath. For instance, Dick Harrison, professor of history, is one of Sweden's best-known historians. He is a popular lecturer, writes for the national daily *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*, and has made several historical documentaries for Swedish television. It was Dick Harrison who started the criticism against the Syllabus in a debate article in *Expressen* on 15 February 2010, 'History in school will be a mess' (Harrison, 2010). This article has become a seminal text in the history wars debates in Sweden, particularly on the topic of the new Syllabus. It likely forced the editors to comment on the Syllabus, and The Minister for Education also issues statements subsequent to its publication. Harrison argued that a syllabus including the ancient period and the Middle East was the best way to tackle racism, writing:

The ancient Mediterranean culture, not just the Greek-Roman, but also the Middle East, is the cradle of the whole modern western civilization. It is also the cradle of other Mediterranean cultures which have influenced historical experience through Judaism, Christianity and Islam...A knowledge of these shared roots, and an understanding of their parallel development – sometimes in conflict and sometimes in fruitful friendship — until the present time is the best remedy I can imagine against contemporary racism. (Harrison, 2010, p. 4)

Similar arguments were used by several editorials, for example, Pernilla Ohlin in *Dalarnas Tidning* in the article ‘A historical blunder’ (Ohlin, 2010).<sup>9</sup> Professors of history, art history, ancient history, history of religions and archaeology criticized the Syllabus in the debate article ‘Understanding will disappear in the new syllabus’ (Andrén, Cullhed, Rystedt, Österberg, et al. 2010, p. 5). Although, in many ways, they had the same view on history as the Syllabus, their intervention highlighted the use of a history perspective, for instance. But, like Harrison, they also criticized the Syllabus for being Eurocentric and too focused on modern history. The argument put forward a long and global perspective on history as a prerequisite for the understanding of contemporary society. They also stressed that new and modern research and perspectives and theories from the humanities were important in the design of the Syllabus. When the scholars discussed the history Syllabus, they also highlighted the importance of a modern religious studies syllabus. According to the researchers, the religious studies syllabus was oldfashioned (Andrén, Cullhed, Rystedt, Österberg, et al, 2010). In a rejoinder the scholars emphasized the necessity of a global history perspective: in a globalized world this was crucial. A school history subject without this viewpoint would betray students in the future (Andrén, Cullhed & Rystedt, 2010).

It is mainly the three debate articles presented here that adopt an additional collective memory approach. The exclusion of ancient Greece from the Syllabus threatened the connection to this vital part of the nation’s identity. Explicitly or implicitly, history in schools had a crucial role in giving Swedish students an identity rooted in a Western tradition built on values from ancient Greece and the Christian tradition. But, at the same time, there was an emphasis on the importance of other cultures. The debaters stressed that a nation is a complex of several cultures, which should be accepted. They also underlined that Sweden is a multicultural, multireligious society where various individuals belonging to different religious traditions, whether Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, must have access to ‘their’ roots. History as a school subject should promote a multicultural society by highlighting various cultural traditions. At the same time, contributors to the debate maintained that history in school has a mission to transmit crucial principles (as democracy) as well as ideas from ancient Mediterranean civilizations and Europe to today’s society.

### ***‘The Viking journeys out of history’? Collective memory with a Western heritage approach in the debate***

A number of debate participants centred their argument on the importance of national and Western cultural heritage. This group only consisted of editors of newspapers and right-wing politicians. The comments below can all be seen as a reaction to the Syllabus proposal but also as support of Harrison’s critique of the proposal. However, this support was to depart from Harrison’s intentions. The maintenance of a national identity as well as an understanding of Western cultural roots was likely to be at stake in teaching based on the new Syllabus. The most high-profile proponent of the inclusion of the ancient period and the Middle Ages in the Syllabus was Björklund, the Minister for Education. His position was especially relevant since he had the formal power over the Syllabus content. According to Björklund, in an article published on 17 February, 2010 history *is* an important subject:

History is an important subject in school. History is a crucial part of our general education, but also a tool for understanding the development of contemporary society and the world.

Antiquity is the cradle of Western civilization. The Middle Ages are a key process through which Sweden became a country: cities were built, our country was Christianized and trade with merchants and money grew. (Björklund, 2010a, p. 2)



Two days later after this publication, Björklund also made a statement, in which he included the new Syllabus of religion on the website of the Liberal People's Party. According to the National Agency for Education's proposal that was circulated for comments, Christianity would not have a privileged position in the Syllabus. Not willing to accept this standpoint, Björklund wrote:

History and religious studies are two foundational subjects in our culture. They provide students with a general education and a reference frame and culture identity. These subjects help the student to understand why our country and world look like they do today. (Björklund, 2010b, p. 2)

Similar statements were also published in the media by researchers, journalists, and social commentators. One group of debaters, mainly editors of conservative and liberal newspapers, stressed the need to include classical education in history teaching, for example, hyperbole comments such as: "Do not abolish Socrates!" ('Avskaffa inte Sokrates!' (editorial), 2010, p. A2.); "Uneducation sufficient for the people?" (Michajlov, 2010, p. A23); "History: Very, very old" (Berggren, 2010, p. A4); and "The Viking journeys out of history?" (Linder, 2010, p. 2). In various ways, editors stated that history teaching should be about connecting the past with contemporary society, for example "If we want to understand how Sweden became Sweden we have to be able to place people and events in the correct chronological order from the 1100s and onwards."

In conservative national newspaper *SvD*, an editorial highlighted that Romans, Vikings and Crusaders were to be excluded from the new Syllabus, along with a number of important people in Swedish history, such as Ansgar and Magnus Ladulås.<sup>10</sup> Instead, according to P.J. Anders Linder, fuzzy modern history perspectives and theories of power were included, writing "You can call this many things, but it's not a school which is based on education knowledge' ['Bildung']" (Linder, 2010, p. 2).

In the conservative regional newspaper *Nya Wermlands tidningen*, the editorial claimed that the Syllabus would damage students' understanding of the present time and context. The cradle of Western civilization is located in antiquity. The migration period and the Middle Ages are also important in the historical development. "Sweden became Sweden" during this period, was the message of the editorial article, titled "Even the ancient Greeks" ('Redan de gamla grekerna' (Editorial), 2010).<sup>11</sup>

Generally speaking, and as can be seen from the examples provided above, commentators' starting point was that the proposed Syllabus presented a threat that Swedish school students would not be taught about the traditionally regarded origins of its nations, and the link to present times would therefore also not be present, resulting in a loss of important cultural and religious heritage. The assumption was that students would not acquire a set of common (national) symbolic tools in order to understand the surrounding world that included common European (read, ancient Greek) heritage must also be part of these symbolic tools.

### ***'The Cuba Missile Crisis, the Berlin Wall and the Gulag?' Disciplinary and postmodern approaches in the debate***

Most of the media reports included above were published in mid-February, while the response to the critique launched appeared somewhat later. Above all, the authors of the Syllabus took time to respond to the arguments lodged regarding the historical content included in the curriculum document. The response made was in the form of comments on previous debate articles rather than as rebuttals of Björklund or Harrison.

Those who defended the Syllabus stated using either explicit or mitigated language that a changed world demanded a changed curriculum. A nationally-oriented curriculum would be problematic in the contemporary era of globalization and migration. Reasons made included

the loss of an homogenous national identity and that it was no longer able to be assumed or unambiguous with Western values undergoing questioning. Supporters of the Syllabus had written articles, research reports and books for pre-service teacher education on these themes (Nordgren, 2006), expressing some basic assumptions about history as a school subject.

The first assumption was that choices need to be made when teaching; history curriculum cannot possibly include everything. A selection enables students to immerse themselves in the subject and topics. History at school must have a connection to contemporary society. According to Sverker Sörlin, professor of the history of ideas, such a connection means that it is possible to develop in-depth knowledge, writing “knowledge requires deepening”, in the arts section of *Dagens Nyheter* (Sörlin, 2010, p. B4.). In 2009, Sörlin had argued similarly in the article *Whose history?*, at which time he developed thoughts expressed by the historian David Ludvigsson (2009). A new Syllabus, it was argued, should include modern perspectives such as tolerance, democracy, equality, and environmental history. He also highlighted that school must prepare students for a globalized world, stating that complex identities are a reality in this world (Sörlin, 2009, p. B4). A similar approach was adopted by other commentators, for example, in the liberal regional newspaper *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* (SSD) Henrik Bredberg asked in an editorial comment:

Should Sweden contend itself with schools that pour forth pupils who have drifted off away from boulder-ridges and lists of kings but who have never got to the post-war period to realize the relevance of concepts such as the Cuba crisis, the Berlin Wall and Gulag? (Bredberg, 2010, p. A4).

“Not everything can be done in history lessons” was the heading of the rejoinder (published almost two weeks after Harrison’s article) from Eliasson and Nordgren (2010, p. A5), the authors of the Syllabus. The authors emphasized the importance of contemporary understanding and the perspective of analyzing uses of history which, along with skills, constituted their basic approach to the Syllabus, asserting:

Progression in conceptual understanding and working with the interpretation of source material show that history is a skills topic, instead of an orientation topic. (Eliasson & Nordgren, 2010, p. 5)

The authors also highlighted the importance of modern history in education in other contexts. In an interview for Swedish Radio, Eliasson clearly stated that contemporary understanding was meant to be the focus of the Syllabus (Svanelid, 2010).

The German historical teaching tradition has greatly influenced Swedish scholars in the field. In this tradition the main purpose of teaching history is to develop the student’s narrative competence and historical consciousness. The student’s own questions (and experience) are important. Teaching history can help students develop their competence to interpret the past and to use this interpretation for future scenarios (Rüsen, 2004; 2011). There is less focus on so-called eternal values in history and the selection principle is connected to a present understanding of history. In the article “What history is worth knowing?”, Eliasson wrote “The selection principle has been to choose the history that gives greater contemporary understanding” (Eliasson, 2010). The overall aim of the syllabus draft that started the debate included this perspective as well (Skolverket, 2010, p. 41). The proponents of the Syllabus raised issues concerning both the importance of developing generic skills and time orientation. In his article, Eliasson also raised the importance of intercultural perspectives present in the Syllabus. The Syllabus draft that Eliasson contributed to and supervised included aims that support a critical and reflexive approach. The students should for example, “Critically examine and evaluate sources as a basis for creating historical knowledge” (Skolverket remiss, 2010, pp. 41-42).

The authors of the Syllabus did not explicitly relate their perspective on history to a disciplinary or postmodern approach in articles responding to criticisms. However, in relation

to Seixas' conceptualization there is an obvious connection between the draft and a disciplinary as well as a postmodern approach (see also Parkes' 2013 discussion of Lgr 11 and postmodernism). The proposal for the new Syllabus and the authors' defence emphasized several aspects that were opposed to the view subsequently established in the collective memory approach. Not including ancient Greece in the Syllabus could have been the authors' way to signal their critical stance on the Eurocentric view of the historical narrative.

### **A nation-centric turn? Conclusions and discussion**

Berger & Conrad (2015) show that a methodological nationalism has made a comeback in historiography. After a background position, the ambition to highlight national aspects in historiography has heightened. Interest in national and historical meta narratives has increased at the expense of a borderless world and universal values. History Wars as a phenomenon can be understood in relation to this general trend in historiography. According to Taylor & Guyver (2010), and Éthier & Lefrançois (2012), for example, the struggle over history in school can be seen as a culture war about national identity, in which politicians interfere with curricula that they consider not to be sufficiently instilling the nation's tradition onto students. The Swedish debate was also influenced as politicians, academics, and social commentators pointed to the omission of central national aspects in the proposed new curriculum. This debate can also be related to the general development of historiography.

The debate was possibly somewhat less intense than in other countries, such as in Estonia, for example, where the question of how World War II was to be remembered led to widespread anger in the Russian minority community (Potapenko, 2010). At the same time, however, the debate about history as a school subject has long been the focus of leading politicians and, arguably, the responsible minister built his political career by focusing on history as a central identity subject in the early 2000s (Björklund, 2001, p. 2).

The Swedish debate was not concerned with the interpretation of isolated important events or the representation of ethnic groups in the Syllabus. According to some researchers, this is because Sweden has been a relatively homogeneous country with a long standing tradition of consensus culture (Zander, 2001). There might be some truth in such conclusions, but it is worth noting that it was only the social studies topics that were publicly debated in connection with the new curriculum. In sum, the proposals were criticized because the curriculum did not include the nation's geography and the nation's Christian heritage (Greider, 2010; Andrén, Cullhed, Rystedt, Österberg, et al. 2010; Österberg, 2010).

It is still very important for social commentators, politicians, and scholars in Sweden and the rest of the world to take a stand on subjects that concern the past of the nation and contemporary identity. Several North American studies indicate this; for example Osborne, points out that a common critique of curricula is that "Canadian history no longer tells a coherent national story aimed at giving Canadians a sense of national identity and strengthening national unity" (Osborne, 2003, p. 594). Similarly in Australia, politicians have launched criticisms of history education and even actively tried to influence the curricular content (Taylor, 2012; Parkes, 2007).

In the Swedish debate, the question of national identity was connected to a coherent Swedish history and the Christian tradition. Critics asserted that the new curriculum erased connections both to the ancient Western heritage and the Christian tradition. An important difference between the debate about Swedish history and other history and culture wars is that even those who articulated the sharpest critique of the Syllabus proposal indirectly accepted that Sweden was a multicultural society where several different perspectives should be included in national history. The debate also reflects an almost global Western trend, in

which advocating a national collective memory approach is combined with control of the school through accountability (VanSledright, 2011; Evans, 2012; Stearns, 2010). In Sweden, Björklund is the foremost representative of this perspective. The desire for more canon and antiquity in the curriculum thus went hand in hand with a school system characterized by accountability.

### **What kind of history should be taught in school?**

The collective memory approach was a central perspective in the debate about which history should be taught in schools. History education should contribute to national identity, social cohesion and citizenship, but according to the critics, students' socialization into a Western and Swedish heritage was threatened in the draft. This view of history education can be related to a long tradition in history teaching (Englund, 1986; Seixas, 2000; Sødning Jensen, 1978). There were similar trends in the debate of the curricula of other social studies subjects such as religious studies, where presuppositions of links between history, Christianity and national identity were evident (Österberg, 2010). There was, in other words, an implicit assimilation and socialization agenda.

The additional collective memory approach to history in school, already broached in this article, was also represented in the debate. Dunn (2000) and Nordgren (2006) also discuss how pluralistic perspective on history in a multicultural context can lead to an additional perspective. There was still a distinct idea of Swedish origin in antiquity. But by studying a variety of cultures students can learn skills to handle a modern, globalized, and multicultural world. A main concern is that absence of early history and negligence of different cultures could lead to racism and chauvinism.

In the *public debate*, it appeared that the purpose of history (and religious studies) in schools was mainly to link the past with contemporary society. Ancient Greece and the Middle Ages were frequently seen as the key eras of a common past. As a result of the debates, one change was the explicit inclusion of antiquity as well as the inclusion of the concept education [*bildung*] in the overall aim of the subject. As shown above, this is part of a back-to-basics movement for which the civilisation myth of the Western tradition is crucial (Gorbahn, 2011). Though, throughout the entire post-war period, the weakened status of ancient Greece in the Syllabus had been criticized by academics and school teachers alike. Antiquity and the Middle Ages were described as some of the essential components of Western cultural traditions. It has been argued that students who are ignorant of the ancient cultural heritage risk having a faulty and incomplete understanding of many of the self-evident symbols and traditions that Sweden have inherited from antiquity; the important connection between democracy and antiquity was one of the topics thus emphasized (Almenius, 1974; Hallenius, 2011; Zander, 2001). According to the authors of the Syllabus and its supporters, the overall aim of teaching history was not to impart a specific historical content. Rather, history teaching should develop students' own historical consciousness in a multicultural society with a recognition that students' present conditions and questions are important. New times demand *new narratives*, as Professor Sörlin put it (Sörlin, 2009, p. B4).

The authors of the Syllabus and some other debaters did not explicitly relate their perspectives on history to a disciplinary or postmodern approach. In relation to Seixas' conceptualization (2000; 2007), though, there are obvious signs of a disciplinary and a postmodern approach in the Syllabus.

However, it is clear that the debate had an impact on the final version of the Syllabus, with changes made to explicitly include the ancient period. Teaching, as the final document reads, should include "Antiquity: its main features as epoch and its importance to our present time"

(Lgr 11, p. 176). The final version of the Syllabus is a compromise. The core content shows a rather narrow nationalist and Western perspective, but at the same time the Syllabus has maintained an intercultural perspective on history. In sum, there are stabilizers in the educational system that both prevented the breakthrough of an excessive nationalist perspective and secured the introduction of a modern global intercultural curriculum.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the Swedish education system differentiates between primary school (compulsory, years 1-9) and secondary school (voluntary, years 10-12).

<sup>2</sup> I will use *curriculum* to denote the overall curriculum. In Sweden the curriculum contains three parts: fundamental values and tasks of schools; overall goals and guidelines for education; and syllabi, which describe the content and goals of different subject. When I use the term *syllabus*, I refer to the specific description of a school subject.

<sup>3</sup> Seixas points out that does not support Jenkins' 'extreme' version of postmodernism defined by the statement that 'there is no connection between our histories and the past' (Seixas, 2007: 29). See also Parkes (2013) for a relevant discussion of the Swedish syllabus and postmodernism.

<sup>4</sup> At this time, Sweden was governed by a rightist coalition government for the first time in more than ten years. Previously, the Social Democrats had governed.

<sup>5</sup> Note that the Swedish parliament and government decide on the overall national goals in the curricula and syllabi.

<sup>6</sup> Media Archive is a national database that, among other material, supplies digitized Swedish periodicals. The digitized versions of the dailies are based on the printed versions. I have used search terms such as 'debaters', 'Lgr 11', 'antiken', 'kursplan historia', 'debatt om kursplanen i historia' [antiquity, history syllabus, debate about the history syllabus].

<sup>7</sup> In Sweden, years 7–9 constitute lower-secondary education. This stage is called junior high school [högstadiet].

<sup>8</sup> Compare this to Dunn's (2000), Symcox's (2002), Johansson's (2012) and Nordgren's (2006) reasoning about history teaching in a multicultural context.

<sup>9</sup> See also Olsson (2010), Holmberg (2010) and *Hela världshistorien måste läras ut* [The entire world history must be taught] (2010).

<sup>10</sup> Ansgar was the person who initiated the Christianization of Sweden in the ninth century. Ladulås was a Swedish king in the Middle Ages.

<sup>11</sup> For more examples, see for example statements from *Skaraborgs Allehanda (SLA)* 'Unthinkable to mutilate history', ('Otänkbart att stympa historien', 2010); *Smålandsposten*: 'A history without Antiquity is no history'. (Tunström, 2010).