

The Popular Movement Marinade The Dominating Civil Society Framework in Sweden

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The existence and structure of formal memberships in a country have often been used as indicators of the country's degree of civility or engagement in the population (Almond and Verba 1963; Curtis, Grabb and Baer 1992; Curtis Baer and Grabb 2001; Putnam 2000). In these studies, the organisational level is left out of the analysis, thus ignoring the primary context in which these memberships exist and develop. At the same time, several larger nonprofit organisations existing in many countries today, as well as on the international level, are organised as federative membership-based organisations. A number of primary associations (with individuals as members) form the base of the organisation while later on regional, national and even international structures are established. Only a limited line of research has recognised the importance of these federated organisations and their members in the nonprofit or voluntary sector literature (see, i.e., Smith 2000; Young 1997).

Regardless of how we choose to characterize or explain a certain country's civil society or its associated social practices, this is always done in relation to a certain context. The organisational sphere in the particular country is an important arena where the social practice around memberships is reproduced. This paper is based on an on-going Swedish research project with a focus on the construction of the individual membership in large federations. The point of departure for this attention has its base in a perspective where the membership referred to is viewed as a relationship between an individual and a specific organization. Furthermore, the project involves a number of the largest and most important federative and membership-based organisations in Sweden. The study was begun in 2001, and we will here report on some of our preliminary empirical findings as well as discuss some of our more conceptual work.

The most common way in Sweden to refer to civil society-related issues and organisations is through, or related to, the popular movement (*folkrörelse*) concept (Wijkström and Lundström 2002; Lundström and Wijkström 1997). The idea of large-scale, membership-based and open organisations, often democratically governed, is found at the core of this concept. The importance of this concept is also well illustrated in the century-long history and development of Swedish civil society, as it is portrayed in earlier research as well as in the more public debate (see e.g. Heckscher 1951; Lundkvist 1977; Thörnberg 1943). Through the use of a mix of empirical evidence, from the studied federations as well as other sources, it is our intention in this paper to explore and make visible what we here term a *popular movement marinade*. This is a marinade in which not only Swedish nonprofits and their members are found, but also the legal system surrounding the civil society arena, the construction of various subsidy structures or the political debate in the field. In the analysis, we focus on the use of three central popular movement attributes – *the membership*, *democracy*, and *geographical extension*. These attributes are repeatedly used and given meaning by the leaders in the organisations. We also discuss the social (re)production of how the civil society and its related practice in Sweden is perceived and characterized. In the paper, we finally argue that this popular movement understanding represents something so embedded and well-institutionalised in Sweden that it often seems to be taken for granted, as if Swedish civil society thinking and practice would be marinated in it.