

The Social Democratic Hegemony in the Swedish Trade Unions – A Summary of the book “Kampen om facket. Det socialdemokratiska facket under 1900-talet” (under publicering 2012. Borea)

The book emphasizes the power struggle in the textile, metal work and paper mill unions in the industrial town Norrköping during the twentieth century. After a constant struggle between the social democrats and the communists in the Swedish blue-collar trade union movement, the social democrats around 1948 succeeded in creating hegemony in unions. The power resources made it possible for the Landsorganisationen (LO) to establish an alliance for economical growth together with the employee organizations, especially Svenska Arbetsgivarföreningen (SAF) and the state, in order to establish a prosperous welfare state. As a consequence of the alliance the trade union movement accepted far-reaching rationalizations in exchange of economical benefits, which were transferred through pay increases to taxes to welfare reforms.

The precondition of the social democratic hegemony in the unions was the institutionalised political cooperation between the LO and the Social Democratic Party (SAP) on national and local level, which started in the 40th. The purposes of the trade union-political cooperation were to control the social democratic hegemony in the unions, to mobilize the trade union members in the political elections and to reach trade union political influence on the local and the national level. For example the party could control the elections to the trade union boards.

In the 70th a global structural crisis broke the ongoing economical growth. As the state no longer could guarantee further deliveries of increasing welfare the alliance of economical growth was annulled. This cracked the unity in the labour movement and created the “war of the roses”. The unions and the party tried to solve the lack of economical growth in different ways. The unions campaigned for more Keynesian economical politics and defended the welfare state, while the party in the 80th looked for new solutions with deregulations of the market and demands of more efficiency in the welfare sector. Another cause of the crisis between the unions and the party was the new competition between the unions and the social democratic women organization about the political influences in the party and in politics. This changes resulted in a marginalization of the political power of the unions and in a weakened social democratic hegemony in the trade unions.

In the latter parts of the book the undermined hegemony is studied. The concept of

conscientiousness was an important part of the hegemony. From the 70th the conscientious morale became old-fashioned and the concept became “thinner”. Another part of the hegemony was the trade union identity, which was constituted by the identification with the labour movement network, with the norms of class and with narratives, rituals and symbols. Also this kind of identification became “thinner” in the 70th when it no longer was granted to read the social democratic paper, to buy food at the co-op and so on. So, also in this respect the social democratic hegemony lost in importance.

A third part of the hegemony was the democratic practices in the trade unions. They also changed in a lesser and lesser democratic way. Fusions and the creation of regional unions created – especially in the 70th but in some cases earlier – a huge distance between the members and the ruling oligarchies. Until the 80th it was possible to legitimize the internal power relations between members and the trustees and ombudsmen by welfare state program, but as it began to lose in importance in the 80th the problems grew.

The stability of the hegemony was depended of institutionalisation. When the hegemony diluted one source was the un-institutionalisation. In some respects the labour movement had a tendency to become a cult with very strong mechanisms of exclusion and internal control. In the latter period these kinds of expressions were undermined by the lack of uniting morale.

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