

Shaping the Public Sphere. A Collective Biography of Stockholm Women 1880–1920 – Présentation d'une recherche en cours

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Introduction

Le projet de recherche "Shaping the Public Sphere. A Collective Biography of Stockholm Women 1880-1920", financé par la Fondation Tercentenaire de la Banque de Suède, est consacré à l'étude d'un groupe de femmes bourgeoises pionnières, actives dans l'espace public suédois émergent autour du tournant du siècle 1900. En d'autres mots, il s'agit d'une étude historique, d'une étude centrée sur les femmes, et, nous emploierions volontiers ce terme, de l'étude d'une élite. Le titre du projet reflète ses directions principales. Une de nos questions de recherche a trait à la contribution de ces femmes pour former la publicité. Une autre, et la plus centrale, concerne ces femmes elles-mêmes: qui étaient-elles? quelles étaient leurs caractéristiques sociales, leurs ressources, héritées ou acquises au cours de leurs vies – quelles étaient les conditions sociales de l'entrée dans la sphère publique?

Les décennies autour de 1900 ont été identifiées comme une période décisive pour l'entrée dans l'espace public suédois de ce groupe social jusqu'alors exclu, les femmes bourgeoises. En fait, l'entrée d'une élite féminine dans la publicité fait partie de la grande transformation sociale de la dernière partie du XIXe siècle donnant naissance à la société suédoise moderne, celle que l'on appelle souvent "la poussée de la modernité". Pour situer un peu le lecteur, nous donnerons ici très brièvement les grands traits de cette transformation et quelques faits sur la situation des femmes. Nous avertissons en même temps le lecteur du fait que cette présentation d'une recherche en cours sera bilingue. Certaines parties seront en français, d'autres en anglais. Nous espérons que cela ne fera pas trop d'obstacles à la compréhension du texte; cela en a beaucoup facilité la rédaction.

Éléments importants de cette grande transformation sociale sont la libéralisation de l'économie, l'essor économique dû à la florissante industrie du bois et à l'exploitation des gisements de minerai de la Suède du Nord, ainsi que la fondation de banques commerciales modernes. D'autres éléments, non moins importants, sont la révolution des communications représentée par les chemins de fer et la téléphone (en 1900, Stockholm était la ville du monde la plus riche en téléphones), la croissance des mouvements populaires (mouvements religieux dissidents et mouvement anti-alcoolique, syndicalisme et mouvement ouvrier politique – le dernier ayant pour résultat la fondation du Parti social-démocrate en 1889) et, finalement, la libéralisation politique successive.

Au tournant du siècle, les femmes avaient déjà été accordé certains droits civiques. Le droit de succession à l'égalité des hommes date de 1845; la majorité des femmes non mariées, la liberté du commerce et l'accession des femmes aux petits emplois publics, c'est-à-dire surtout dans les PTT, viennent dans les années 1860. Le droit de vote des femmes aux élections

communales, avec un barème qui en exclut la grande majorité d'entre elles, date de la même époque. Au début des années 1870 l'on accorde aux femmes le droit de passer le baccalauréat et la plupart des examens d'université. Mais ce n'est qu'au début des années 1920 qu'elles reçoivent le plein droit de vote et accèdent aux emplois publics élevés. Une femme mariée reste mineure jusqu'en 1920. Les femmes dont nous suivons la vie et l'oeuvre appartiennent à la première génération de femmes bourgeoises exerçant une activité professionnelle pour gagner leur vie.

Des mouvements des droits de la femme, attirant des membres des deux sexes, existaient depuis les années 1870, et surtout dans les années 1880 "la question des femmes" fut l'objet d'un débat public très vif.

Le projet de recherche "Shaping the Public Sphere. A Collective Biography of Stockholm Women 1880-1920" rassemble une dizaine de chercheurs de différentes universités et centres de recherche. Il est dirigé par Donald Broady, professeur d'éducation à l'université d'Uppsala. La plupart des chercheurs ont la même appartenance disciplinaire: nous sommes avant tout des spécialistes de l'éducation, une ou deux des historiennes. Et, un fait auquel nous reviendrons plus tard, la grande majorité d'entre nous sont des femmes.

L'étude: objet et questions centrales

Dans cette recherche, nous analyserons les chemins du privé au public pris par un groupe de femmes de Stockholm agissant dans l'espace public émergent et parfois contribuant au développement de champs sociaux nouveaux, ainsi que les contributions à l'émergence d'espaces publics modernes et aux champs sociaux de certaines d'entre elles. Un foyer d'attention sont les réseaux sociaux féminins et leur rôle pour ces femmes. Un autre foyer d'attention est la ville de Stockholm en tant que lieu de rencontre de ces femmes: les rassemblant, les mettant en contact les unes avec les autres (dans des associations, des réves etc) et intensifiant l'énergie sociale développée.

Le groupe concerné consiste en une soixantaine de femmes actives principalement dans trois espaces: dans le domaine de l'éducation (fondatrices et directrices de collèges privés, professeurs de collèges de jeunes filles, professeurs d'écoles normales), dans la philanthropie et le soin des malades, et dans la vie culturelle. Chacun des espaces est d'abord l'objet d'une ou plusieurs études relativement indépendantes, réparties parmi les chercheurs du projet.

Questions centrales de la recherche sont:

1. Quelles étaient les ressources qu'apportaient ces femmes et comment ont-elles fait pour entrer dans les espaces publics ou champs sociaux existants? Quelles furent leurs stratégies?
2. Comment ont fonctionné les lieux de rencontre et les réseaux sociaux? Dans quelle mesure furent-ils des endroits pour accumuler des ressources, peut-être avec différentes fonctions pour des femmes pourvues d'un capital de base différent? (Dans quelle mesure doivent les contributions de ces femmes être considérées comme une entreprise *commune*?)
3. Comment les réseaux féminins ont-ils servi de base pour des initiatives et coups dans le débat public, et pour des efforts contribuant à l'émergence de champs sociaux nouveaux? (Dans quelle mesure les actions de ces femmes ont-elles été une réponse, ou un défi, aux structures dominantes de classe et de genre?)

Instruments de travail et méthode

Les notions théoriques servant de point de départ pour le travail proviennent du sociologue Pierre Bourdieu et du philosophe Jürgen Habermas: les concepts de *capital* et de *champ* de Bourdieu; la notion de *publicité*, espace public, d’Habermas. (Un champ social, dans ce sens, constitue un système de relations entre positions occupées par des agents et des institutions luttant de quelque chose qui leur est commun; la notion de capital se réfère à des ressources de différentes espèces, notamment des ressources d’ordre économique, culturel, social.)

La notion de *publicité* (espace public, sphère publique – “bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit“ dans Habermas 1962) a pour centre l’idée d’un public critique et raisonneur qui, sous des conditions d’égalité, mettent sous débat des affaires d’intérêt commun. Chez Habermas la notion d’un espace public est contrasté à la fois au privé et à une publicité de l’État. La notion d’Habermas, souvent critiquée mais souvent utilisée dans des études féministes soulignant le caractère privé de la vie et des occupations des femmes, est certainement discutable. Dans le projet nous nous sommes proposés de mettre à l’épreuve et l’opposition privé-public et les concepts bourdieusiens – qui peut-être ne sont pas suffisants, ou mal découpés – pour comprendre les phénomènes de l’époque, surtout les actions de ces femmes.

La notion de *réseau*, réseau social, se réfère à des relations entre individus. Le modèle d’analyse se fonde sur l’hypothèse que les réseaux sociaux féminins fonctionnaient comme des bases pour des initiatives dans les espaces publics que nous distinguons – lesquels, à leur tour, furent une condition pour l’émergence de champs dans le sens moderne.

One methodological aim is to combine studies of networks with studies of social fields. From previous research we had drawn the conclusion that the logic in the encounters and strategies of these women might be found rather in the networks than in the emerging fields, social institutions, organizations and so on. We had for example observed that many of them were active in surprisingly many and various contexts: in philanthropy, different kinds of political movements, reform education initiatives, womens’ rights movements, art and literature, and so on. Therefore their investments and interventions would be rather invisible if you study each one of these areas in isolation.

A prosopographic method is used, i. e. information about these women’s properties and resources - social origin, educational career, symbolic, economic and social capital, social and cultural practices - is collected and serves as a basis for analyses of their trajectories and strategies (see further below: The database).

We try to find data on the womens’

Social origin

- Mother’s occupation, education, positions
- Father’s occupation, education, positions
- Number of brothers and sisters, rank (oldest, youngest etc)

(Interesting cases when there was no son in the family and the parents spent on the daughter. Or to be the oldest is obviously often a good position for future high aiming trajectories)

- Grandparents’ occupation, education, positions
- Place of birth

- Place of upbringing

Educational capital

- Education, private, public
- Academic or professional education
- Sojourns abroad

Social capital

- Social intercourse in the parental home
- Time spent in other families (why?)
- Influential kinsfolk
- Married or not
- Children or not
- Social intercourse as grown up
- Part in women's' informal networks
- Associations, clubs
- Member of state commissions, foundations
- Relations to dominant groups (high civil servants, the royal court)

Economic capital

- Wealth, earthly goods
- Relations to patrons, maecenases

(extremely important to receive support from some uncle)

Political and religious capital

- Position in political organisations
- Political standpoints (the right to vote issue, the women's issue, the workers' issue, issues on how to educate the children etc)
- Religious standpoints

Specific symbolic capital

Assets that are valued either within certain fields or domains or within women's networks

La base de données

Dans le cadre du projet une base de données est bâtie, qui sera accessible à d'autres chercheurs quand le projet aura été mené à terme. Dans ce travail, nous produisons trois (quatre) différentes sortes de textes:

- petites biographies de femmes, leurs publications inclus, 1-3 pages
- textes plus élaborés, surtout sur les différentes formes de capital de la femme (voir la liste plus haut), 10-20 pages
- à partir de ces derniers, nous isolons des données spécifiques pour une analyse des correspondances, c'est-à-dire une liste de variables
- finalement, des textes élaborés sur certaines femmes, leur vie et oeuvre, 60-100 pages

Nous nous servons et de sources primaires et de sources secondaires.

Variables et modalités: le travail

Quels variables, et quelles modalités, seraient les plus féconds pour notre analyse? Et, en même temps, basés sur des informations possibles à retrouver dans un temps limité? Le travail pour décider de cette question cruciale a été long et difficile. Nous donnerons ici un compte-rendu de ce travail qui permettra de voir ce qu'est un travail de recherche à l'état brut.

Dès le printemps 2000, nous commençons à énumérer des variables que nous croyions nécessaires. Nous nous apercevions très vite que notre base pour ce travail était insuffisante. La conséquence en fut d'attendre encore quelque temps pour avoir un fondement plus stable. C'est pourquoi nous commençons un travail systématique pour décrire, formaliser et sommer les informations sur les femmes, surtout en ce qui concerne les différentes formes de capital – les textes du type 2 ci-dessus. Pour ces textes, nous élaborions une liste de contenu à suivre par chaque chercheur, et chacune de nous écrivit un nombre de ces textes, baptisés "analyses de capitaux" (ou "descriptions de capitaux").

De nouveau, nous essayions d'isoler quelques variables centraux. Cette fois-ci, nous trouvions que les "analyses de capitaux" étaient de caractère bien différent: quelques-uns très riches et détaillés, d'autres plutôt maigres. Peu de femmes avait des descriptions riches. Maintenant, notre problème fut de décider quels variables étaient absolument nécessaires pour *toutes* les femmes. Ces variables, les variables *centraux*, doivent être possibles de localiser pour toutes nos femmes. Ils consistent en des informations brutes, factuelles. Une autre sorte de variables sont des variables *souhaitables*, par exemple le type de revue où est publié un article écrit par une de nos femmes. Une troisième sorte sont des variables "si possible"; par exemple les prises de position dans les questions vivement débattues de l'époque comme le droit de vote, la défense du territoire, la paix.

À ce moment même, une de nos collègues travaille sur les "analyses de capitaux" faits jusqu'à maintenant pour marquer les informations qui y sont données pour toutes les femmes.

Quelques résultats

Comme la base de données n'est pas complétée et l'analyse générale donc reste à faire, ce qui sera présenté sous cette rubrique concernant le groupe dans son entier sont des résultats préliminaires et "impressionnistes". Nous présentons avant tout des acquis concernant chaque espace.

D'abord deux faits très simples, une observation et quelques résultats préliminaires concernant toutes les femmes du groupe:

- La plupart des femmes ne sont pas mariées; la plupart des mariées n'ont pas d'enfants
- La question des générations est importante. Les femmes nées en 1850 ou 1860 n'avaient, dans leurs visions et stratégies pour le futur, le même "champs des possibles" que celles nées en 1870 et plus tard. Ce n'est qu'après 1873, par exemple, que l'idée de poursuivre des études supérieures s'ouvrit comme une possibilité, une voie possible à suivre pour une femme.
- Les réseaux féminins semblent très importants. Parfois fondés très tôt, ils sont souvent de longue durée. Exemples sont des réseaux originant dans les collèges de jeunes filles; dans l'Institut de formation de professeurs pour les collèges de jeunes filles (situé à Stockholm et unique en Suède); dans l'Association des étudiantes d'Uppsala.
- Le capital social (des relations d'amitié, de famille) s'est montré bien plus important que nous ne croyions.

- La religion, surtout en tant que “sens de la vocation” s’est aussi montrée plus important que nous ne croyions – pour ces femmes elles-mêmes. Si ce que l’on fait aura un sens, il doit être utile à vos frères et soeurs et à toute l’humanité. L’orientation n’est pas choisie par l’individu mais une vocation à laquelle l’on doit obéir.

The educational sphere

- The concept of “shadow field” (cf Roos & Rotkirch 1998; Broady & Ullman 2001) seems useful to understand the relation between the world constituted by the private girls’ schools and co-educational schools, at the one hand, and the public grammar schools for boys at the other.

- Private girls’ schools and the private mixed schools seem to have been parts of the *same* space, the *same* shadow field. The strategies of the founding ladies were essentially not at creating schools for girls, but rather at creating *private* schools, in which the pedagogical freedom could be conquered and defended – if the schools were for boys and girls or for only girls did not matter very much. And thereby this world of private girls’ schools and the private mixed schools, and the networks of the head mistresses and teachers (which in fact constituted the majority of highly educated professionally active women at the turn of the century 1900) became a basis for these women’s interventions into numerous parts of the public sphere and many of the emerging social fields.

-The meanings assigned to different school forms could be read in the symbolic space constituted by the material site for teaching, the school buildings of Stockholm. (The following development is a concentrate taken from Linné & Skog-Östlin 2002.)

The public grammar schools, supported by the state, were schools only for boys, and boys mostly from the upper middle class, and over time from the lower middle class. It was a school for the future male elite and a completely male world where young boys were brought up to men by men. The curriculum was focussed on knowledge and it prepared both for higher education and for the trade, industry and business world. The contents were adapted to the university subjects. The building of the public grammar school *Norra Latin*, erected in 1880 at high costs, situated at the very centre of the city and housing 800 students, can be seen as a symbol of this school ethos. The facade, the interior, the forms and the mural paintings made of this building something charged with symbolic references towards the past, towards the great classical heritage of ideas and virtues, and towards the fine arts. They shaped the habitus of a future elite.

The elementary schools were schools for both boys and girls from the lower classes, compulsory for those who could not afford to go to a girl’s school or the grammar school. It was a school for the masses. The curriculum was centered on “God and the Fatherland”. The subjects were focussed on basic citizen knowledge like reading, writing, arithmetics, history, religion. At the turn of the century, even a more practical content like hygiene and household knowledge became part of the curriculum, at least for the girls. Even if the elementary school was a school for both sexes, it prepared them for different futures. The elementary school building of *Adolf Fredriks norra folkskola*, inaugurated in 1902, very large (like other elementary schools built at this time) but letting in much daylight, and situated at the northern outskirts of Stockholm, reflects this school ethos. Maxims, symbols and figures decorated the facade. The maxims undoubtedly reflected basic ideas of the curriculum: “Lazy hand makes poor, laborius makes rich”, “No man can afford to loose his Fatherland”, “A good conscience is a daily feast”, “A good cheer is good armour” etc.

The figures too: spelling-book, ink-pot, abacus, a pair of scissors and tape measure, tools of different kinds, a Christian cross, the national coat of arms. Boys and girls had special entrances. Above the boys' entrance was the maxim "Knowledge is power", above the girls' another, "Exercise makes the master". In short, the school ethos gave a message to the pupils that they were going to become good workers and good citizens obeying the authorities, and if they were girls also being able to take care of homes and children.

The girls' schools were schools for the women of the educated classes, those who lived in the cities and were part of the upper and middle class, but not necessarily wealthy. These girls and women were supposed to become wives and mothers and spend their lives in the homes, taking care of husband, children and household. The curriculum was less characterized by knowledge than in the grammar schools and more focussed on cultural education, adapted to an "educated wife and mother", and personality development. The schools also prepared for more practical tasks like cooking, sewing. They were private, with financial support from the state. Most teachers were women – like in the elementary schools - some of them well educated. The ethos of the girls' school was materialised in the building and its surroundings: small, homelike, melting into the surroundings. The building of *Åhlinska skolan* could easily be taken for a dwelling house in a wealthy district in Stockholm. The building mediated restraint and moderateness to the bodies and minds of the girls. It must have given them an impression that their future was in a private sphere and that they were less important than the boys and different from them – but also something else and different from the boys and girls attending *Adolf Fredriks norra folkskola*.

The philanthropical sphere

Three kinds of philanthropically active women have been identified:

1) ladies from the court, who have a royal duty to help the poor and needy. Examples are queen Josephine (1807–1876), a catholic, her daughter Eugénie (1830-1889), a pietist and an active philanthropist, and queen Sophia, turning towards the low-church like Eugénie and the founder of a big Stockholm hospital in the 1880ies. This tendency can still be seen today in queen Silvia and the princess Victoria, protectors of children.

2) philanthropists from the upper classes, often from wealthy families, married to prominent men, without children, well educated, active in many contexts: networks, associations, calls, petitions where wealthy and well-known persons take a part. These women are used to making decisions, to commanding, to organising. Examples are Ebba Lind af Hageby, Anna Hierta Retzius, Agda Montelius, Anna Lindhagen. In their work, they keep a distance to those whom they want to "help".

3) philanthropist of a kind that may be described as a bit "lower" than those above: usually middle class, with rather wealthy parents and family, adequate education, good living quarters, unmarried, no children. Certain could have lived off their economical heritage – but do not do so. These women often establish a more direct contact with their "protégés", a personal contact; they want to change, refine and better both the women concerned and their conditions. They establish Workers' homes for women, Homes for the sick, for convalescents, associations to support different activities, for instance The welfare of the Blind, The association for Summer homes for Convalescents etc. They take an active part in already established philanthropical contexts. Examples here are Agnes Lagerstedt, Agda Meyerson, Gerda Meyerson.

Women of the first two kinds above are relatively well known from earlier research. The women of the court, however, have not been investigated as to their philanthropical activity. On the other hand they are very few and very special, not influenced by the social transformations like other women – they should probably be seen as part of a publicity of a very old kind, a representative publicity (cf Habermas 1962). Women of the third category have above all been the objects of our research, but a few women from the two other categories as well.

The women of type 1 and 2 may be counted as belonging to a power elite. They have power over *decisions*, over the *setting of an agenda* and over *discourse*, in a much more obvious way than the women of the third kind. Those, however, belong to an elite within their respective domains: Agda Meyerson, for instance, is a woman with power within medical care.

- Within the Jewish religion, the religion to which some of our women belonged, we have found two kinds of philanthropical activity, one male and one female. The male philanthropy left visible traces in the streets of Stockholm. It was directed towards erecting buildings housing homes for children or workers, hospitals, nursing homes, but also buildings like theaters. The male philanthropy was based on economics and system-building; the female philanthropy was more personal, practical, oriented towards the individual and often practised in the homes.

The cultural sphere

- For many of the female literary critics and publicists who are the object of one of the two ongoing studies within the cultural sphere, you find a considerable amount of social capital. This capital was often inherited and sometimes primarily the husband's. To enter a literary sphere or field, the women seem to have made use of this capital. If you see the female networks and meeting-places as creating a kind of common social capital, the tendency is still more pronounced. The only one of these women who had a university degree, Klara Johanson (1875-1948), was also the one who reached an acknowledged position in a literary field where most of the critics had an academic background. But for her too, the female networks seem important to explain her position. At the beginning of her career, they gave her the possibility to work for a women's rights periodical and shortly thereafter to publish articles in a renowned literary review. In this sense, the entrance into a public sphere may be seen as the result of a joint, female effort.

- The concept of "female public sphere" might be useful to explain the characteristics of these women, their activities and sometimes their standpoints in literary questions.

- The salons, associations and circles where women and men belonging to a cultural sphere in the Swedish capital met did not bring together persons sharing fundamental attitudes towards art or literature. They brought together people with different attitudes and beliefs. Further, they assembled persons belonging to different areas within the wider realm of culture. Artists and writers didn't keep apart but mixed with each other. And finally there is very often a blend with men from the economic realm and a political publicity. Even in the most distinctive literary circles, like the salon held in the 1880-ies by the realist and feminist author Anne-Charlotte Leffler, assembling radical writers and publicists, you find among the habitués publicists of the old school and idealist writers.

How should this be explained? One possibility is of course to point to the smallness of the town of Stockholm, a town where many of the persons active in a public sphere are in fact relatives as well, blood relatives and relatives by marriage. They are cousins or second

cousins, uncle and niece or nephew, brother- and sister-in-law etc. Another possibility is to point to the presence of the women. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1998, p. 117), women “civilize by taking away the bluntness and brutality from social relations”. If we accept that, this means that the presence of women in the circles and associations in itself may have “civilized” their character, making battles and strategies for domination within a certain cultural field less acute. Finally, and most interesting theoretically, is a third possibility which requires an elaborated bird’s eye view. A thorough study of the Swedish artistic and literary fields at the turn of the 20th century might show that these fields or spheres were not autonomous, but structurally dominated by the dominant fractions of the bourgeoisie. (The three proposed interpretations are of course not mutually exclusive. The third one, however, encompasses the other two and seems to give the most satisfying understanding of the lack of differentiation.)

Methodological reflections

In our work so far we have been very much concerned with the biography of individual women. The “simple” facts for the common database – which are in no way simple to find even for a single individual, and still more so when we want the same kind of information for 60 women or more – have up to now been put second to rather in-depth studies of a few women per researcher. The difficulties encountered when writing a biography, and especially an historical biography, have been an area for methodological reflection. We will present some of these reflections here. They concern the problems met with when trying to understand a life lived long ago: understanding the time of the other, understanding change. Finally, we give short reflections on “understanding your own sex” and the study of gender.

Understanding the time of the other

Modern advocates of historical biography agree that the biographed individual has to be understood in relation to the times in which she is living, and has to be brought into a time-related context (cf, for instance, Jacques Le Goff 1989). And this goes almost without saying. The question is only to what extent it is possible to understand another time, and, if it is possible, how we set about it.

The problem can be divided into two parts.

The first one concerns our own possibility to understand another age, in a broad sense. “What the times were like”; empirical facts such as the legislation relating to women, what it was like and how it probably affected women’s movements and ways of thinking, the shapes which family relations in a middle-class family normally took, the role played by nationalism, and so on. In this respect, we get help to understand and describe from source material stemming from the period, but above all from earlier research. Our recourse to earlier research, however, means that the historical understanding we achieve is a second-hand understanding. We understand the time through what was seen and understood by others, who themselves have a distance to it. This is inevitable in a research context, but nevertheless well worth emphasizing.

The other problem concerns how the biographee perceived these times, those general conditions. Often the biographer aims at a close understanding of the unique individual. He wants to make out how the biographee perceived herself and her environment, how she looked at her prospects and impediments, why she acted in one way instead of another. The constraints and possibilities in terms of, e.g., what educational choices were available, what opportunities there were to earn one’s living and what occupations were open to women, are ultimately a matter of general frames and probabilities. How the individual experienced the constraints and in her actions directed her life on the basis of existing conditions, is a

question of whether she considered them valid or invalid for *her* – how she interpreted them. There are always individuals who disregard laws, rules and social expectations; women dressing in men's clothes and living a man's life, or, maybe as extreme, becoming a maid instead of the expected schoolmistress.

In this case, the problems of understanding are similar to those we face when trying to understand contemporary human beings. The difference is that in a historical biography the main character cannot answer our questions directly, and, in most cases, neither can other people who knew her rather well. To this we may add the uncertainty the researcher often feels in front of a material reflecting a life lived long ago. How far can we trust our intuitive understanding – how much has actually changed in the way people think and feel? Did the high-flown, emotionally charged way of expressing oneself in letters, for instance, represent a corresponding, highly-strung emotion in the persons in question – or not?

The Swede Svante Nordin (1994) has spoken about the inbuilt features of biography making it both an ideographic and a nomothetic genre. On the one hand, the biographer studies a personal, unique, non-repeatable fate. On the other hand, there is a conformity in the life of every human being, there are a kind of existential *universalia*. We all have a childhood, we grow up and choose a course in life, we fall in love, we probably marry and have children. We grow old; we look back at childhood and major parts of our lives as grown-ups. Our bodies age and we know that we are going to die. It is certainly possible that, in our hesitations as researchers, we have a tendency to fall back on these universal features and ascribe to the biographee thoughts and feelings which we recognise from ourselves, from our closest friends, and from a whole literature where this conformity is illustrated.

And this is not necessarily wrong. Collective representations of childhood, love, marriage and death, influence the individual's way of contemplating the phases of the path of life. Changes in such collective representations, particularly if you consider representations at an unconscious or a semi-conscious level, usually take effect very slowly (cf. the many studies carried out within the area of history of mentalities).

A similar solution to the problem of reaching into what he calls "the individual's internal darkness" is proposed by Gunnar Eriksson (1997). His solution does not specifically concern the problems of history. Yet like our suggestion a moment ago, and like a sociological perspective such as Pierre Bourdieu's, it locates what we so readily consider as the interior of the individual outside of the individual. According to Eriksson, the internal darkness may not exist.

My thesis, as it has been dimly seen in the foregoing, would be that the individual features find their expression further out in the general domain than we usually spontaneously imagine. I am thinking of general things of types such as the spirit of the time, currents of ideas, occupation, class – all things that belong to what you could call the social sphere of the individual. [...] Maybe what a human being really is does not reside in the interior darkness but out in the field illuminated by social forces, maybe the concepts of "interior" and "exterior" are here pieces of a metaphor that leads us astray?

(Eriksson 1997, p. 118, our translation)

We would like to add that we do not have to see what is happening as a passively endured influence. The collective representations can provide the individual with a type-image to which she *actively* adapts, and *through which* she also *perceives herself*. The writer and critic Klara Johanson, around 1900, undoubtedly sees herself as an intellectual. "The intellectual" is a historical type that both has old roots and a specific topicality at the turn of the century, and it is very likely that the type-image was important to her self-perception. The exciting dividing break points are, in the case of Klara Johanson, constituted by the combination of several different type-images: intellectual, woman, intellectual woman.

Understanding change

To make things even more complicated, we may consider the following.

In our attempts to understand the other and her time, we should preferably also keep in mind that what we are dealing with is a constantly ongoing time, a flow of time and change. The biographee lived in a time that altered during the maybe seventy years she lived.

In addition, this constantly ongoing process is a *double* one. The researcher too, with her pre-understanding and her apprehensions of “how it is today”, has lived and lives in a flow of time and change. She has no fixed point from which she can turn around, look backwards and look at the other person’s time.

In the project “Shaping the Public Sphere” we write about people who lived and worked about a hundred years ago. A hundred years ago – is that a long or a short time? How much has changed and how much is the same, or at least pretty much the same? And how are we ourselves connected to that era – to what extent does it live on inside us?

You could of course say that it was not long ago at all. Most of us working in the project are not young, we can take in and remember perhaps 45-50 years. We do not feel that it is much, but still, that is half a century. Our grandparents lived their adult lives at about the same time as the women we are studying; it is not longer ago than that. Through our parents, and perhaps the grandparents themselves, we know a little about our grandparent’s youth. Our parents were influenced by our grandparents times since they were raised by them, and so were we too since our parents influenced us. At least in that sense the Sweden of a hundred years ago still lives inside us, as in others now living. Changes of generation, and the basic human fact that several generations live side by side, imply that representations and knowledge are transmitted, so that memories and thought-structures from several periods coexist in the present. And those times are surely still alive in other ways as well. Reading quite a lot of novels published about a hundred years ago leaves marks. Many of us went to a school characterized by norms more similar to the ones of the early twentieth century than to the norms of today.

At the same time, however, it *is* a long time ago. Many significant changes separate us from those who were born and grew up during the latter part of nineteenth century.

Communications have undergone revolutionary changes, with railways and telephones in common use, motor vehicles; electric light has brought about completely new conditions. The relations between city and countryside are no longer the same, nor are the lived relations between social classes. Society has been secularized, the Christian faith is far less important. Basic things like human fears have changed: the development of the welfare state, for example, has meant that the fear of starving to death has disappeared; social fears, such as the fear of “falling downwards”, are probably less strong now. Women are much more equal to men and so on and so forth. And the direct bonds to the period have been cut off, since there is nobody left whom we could ask what life was like. Experience can only be conveyed to us by written sources. In this respect, we are in the same situation as those who are studying people living several hundred years ago.

The tension between what happened just recently and what happened a long time ago seems to be particularly apparent when we are concerned with the time around 1900. So many things seem to have had their origin at that time; it is not for nothing that the period is called the age of the modern breakthrough. On which side of a modern breakthrough are the individuals we are studying situated? Especially when we enter the area of emotional life, we get bewildered and ask ourselves how long ago it really was. Earlier, we alluded on the tone of voice that could exist – and often did exist – between women. The fact that unmarried women live together, sharing household and a great part of their everyday life, is nothing remarkable. That has been the case during the entire twentieth century, and living together was a necessity for career women particularly around the turn of the century. However, when

these women in their letters express themselves in a way that we perceive as current only between lovers, we hesitate. Was it a question of love, what we now would call lesbian love? In the case of Klara Johanson we may answer yes, we know that much about her. But warm, emotional relations between women, and a corresponding way of expressing oneself in words, seem to have been socially accepted at the end of nineteenth century to a much greater extent than today. It is not necessarily a question of what we now call love, nor even of what has been called “the feministic friendship-love”.

Understanding your own sex

The biographee interprets her own times and their constraints and possibilities. The biographer, on his part, interprets the other individual’s times, actions, attitudes or choices of path. In other words, the biographer must use himself or herself as an instrument. What does it signify, then, that within the project “Shaping the Public Sphere” we are (mostly) female researchers, looking at another group of women? Does sex matter?

The answer will of course depend upon the theoretical perspective adopted. The theoretical perspective of Pierre Bourdieu is important for the project. From that perspective, sex/gender matters. The distinction between male and female historically reproduced for such a long time, manifesting itself in so many different ways today, applies to researchers as well. This means, for example, that we run the risk of being too loyal to the women we study, due to a kind of compensation effect. Or we may have internalized the male-female schema in the form of the opposition hard-soft, and as a direct consequence feel reluctant about “hard” ways of approaching our objects of study, quantifying, reducing and ignoring the unique (cf Bourdieu 1998). Our in-depth studies of relatively few women might well be an example of this.

How to study gender

Some specialists in gender studies do not agree with our research orientation. They would rather focus the gender issue and its own dynamics. We, however, are not convinced that you should have a separate set of tools for the study of men’s domination over women, or the upper classes over the lower classes, or the centre over the periphery or what ever. The sex, to be a man or a women, gets its specific significance together with everything else that constitutes this specific situation for women one hundred years ago.

One example: When studying the girls’ schools most researchers have had as their starting point that this were schools that did something with girls. If we had started with the girls, we would never had understood that the private girls schools and the private mixed schools seem to have been parts of the *same* space, the *same* shadow field.

For more information visit <http://www.skeptron.uu.se/broadys/sec/ffo.htm>

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