



The realm of freedom in new rural governance: Micro-politics of democracy in Sweden



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ABSTRACT

Voluntary associations are at the heart of Swedish rural policy and strategies for governance as partners in bringing about 'development from below.' Examining the implications of this new responsibility being placed on the civil society in new modes of multilevel governance, I ask: do these changes presage greater political space for individuals *vis à vis* the state or is Swedish rural policy premised on ideas about an institutional context that might be disappearing? In comparative research in rural Sweden, I discuss state and civil-society relations at the macro level in light of the gendered micro-politics of associational life on the ground. Through ethnographic research with people involved in development work of different kinds, I examine how ideas about community associations are used to mobilize rural policy. I analyze its' political implications and argue for the importance of analyzing macro in relation to the micropolitics on the ground for a better theoretical understanding of democracy and power in rural governance, in particular its gendered implications. I argue that past collaborative relations between the civil society and the state's administrative apparatuses as well as the current focus of rural policy have enabled the state to hand over service functions to the civil society and diluted their 'voice,' incongruously endangering the institutional basis of rural policy itself. Further, attention to the gendered micropolitics of associational life makes apparent cleavages within civil society and its underlying relations of gender and power that challenge current conceptualizations on the neoliberalization of rural policy.

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1. Introduction

European rural policies build on local groups as the point of departure for rural development activities – on rural associations who would share the burden and the joys of bringing development to their areas and make their voices heard in 'development from below.' In Sweden, voluntary associations are at the heart of rural strategies for development as outlined by the country's Rural Program (RP).¹ Associations in Sweden have a long history rooted in popular movements and in the making of the welfare state. As greater responsibility is devolved to associations for local development in European rural policies² and in a system of multilevel governance,³ rural civil society is being transformed, most notably in its

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¹ <https://www.jordbruksverket.se/download/18.229ea55815233ba0390e8c59/1452694447806/Landsbygdsprogrammet+2014-2020.pdf>.

² e.g. EU Rural Development Program http://ec.europa.eu/agriculture/rural-development-2014-2020/index_en.htm.

³ Multilevel governance as a concept has been used since the early 1990s to grasp how the European Union works in practice with multiple actors (individuals and institutions) who participate at various political levels, from the supranational to the sub-national or local (Stephenson, 2013:817).

composition and roles. What implications does this new responsibility have for democracy at the local level and for state and civil society relations? Do associations provide political space for individuals *vis à vis* the state, especially for women, or is rural policy premised on an institutional context that its own practices might be endangering?

To answer these questions, I study how ideas about community associations are used to mobilize rural policy, analyze the political implications of this process and for a better theoretical understanding of democracy and power in multilevel governance, relate the macro analysis of state-civil society relations with a micro analysis of gender and power relations on the ground. I argue that greater responsibility placed on voluntary associations in the changing context of rural governance might well be eroding the voluntary ethic as well as the political narrative of the civil society as an independent arena. Changing macro relations are bringing to the surface gendered contradictions inherent in associations but not visible in mainstream discussions on civil society and rural governance but as I show, they are vital for understanding the future of European rural governance.

The European Union has created a new context for rural governance in Europe (Copus and Lima, 2015; Sjöblom et al., 2013; Marsden and Sonnino, 2008; Little and Jones, 2000). One result has been to shift rural policy and its implementation away from the direct control of state actors into partnerships with actors across (governance) levels and different policy areas and to the civil society. While competitiveness in agriculture is still the driving force of EU rural policy (Copus et al., 2015), there has been an emphasis on local development under 'LEADER'⁴ in the European Rural Development Program, a local development method that allows local actors to develop an area by using its endogenous development potential. Rural development is meant to be carried out in projects through a range of partnerships between the public, private and voluntary sectors in a system of multilevel governance (Nemes et al., 2015). The work of associations is considered suited to short-term projects that are flexible enough to bring about innovative change (Godenhjelm et al., 2015). Sweden with its history of a vibrant associational life, ranging from place-based groups centered on particular activities to networks that span the national level, has been hailed as particularly suited to this kind of multilevel governance (Nemes et al., 2015:243).

Associational space has been regarded by many scholars since de Tocqueville (1965) as a realm of freedom for local actors, providing them with an active political space *vis à vis* the state. By encouraging the participation of civil society actors in rural governance, LEADER claims not only to bring about effective governance but also to encourage the democratization of decision-making processes on the ground (Shucksmith, 2012). Goverde et al. (2004:174) suggest that new economic opportunities and policy programs, albeit with obstacles, have led to a widening of the space available for women to participate in the formation of new rural contexts. In contrast, others point to a devaluing of gender issues in rural development programs and the relative failure of gender equality projects (Rural, Policy and Gender, 2015; Prugl, 2010; Derksen and Bock, 2007) where women's marginalization in rural development is exacerbated by structural inequalities in ownership of property and their unpaid labor in family farming (Shortall, 2015). In Sweden, the increasing bureaucratization of the civil society (Lundström and Wijkström, 1997; Sjöblom et al., 2013) and the institutionalization of popular movements suggest that existing male dominated power structures are preserved instead of being transformed (SOU, 2004:225). Civil society scholar, Howell (2007: 423) regrets that gendered aspects are rarely discussed or theorized in civil society literature. Greater attention to gender might have led researchers to pay more attention to power and subordination within civil society, thereby introducing caution into debates that portray civil society as the realm of freedom - the benign, virtuous and harmonious - in contrast to the venal, oppressive state.

Thus, at the heart of this paper is an analysis of changing state-civil society relations and how these relate to micro-politics on the ground in the current context of multilevel governance. While LEADER implementation is diverse in different places, a gendered lens on civil society in Sweden brings to light the relations that make up multilevel governance with theoretical importance that goes beyond Sweden. Both civil society and rural governance scholars express regret that relations between local organizing and state institutions or the macro and micro structures of governance are seldom analyzed (Lundström and Wijkström, 1997:249; Sjöblom et al., 2013). Through ethnographic research with people involved in development work in rural Sweden, I address this gap as I analyze the increased involvement of voluntary associations in rural

governance in relation to the gendered micro-politics on the ground.

In order to do that, in Section 2, I bring two roughly parallel bodies of literature into conversation - on civil society with that on rural governance. In both, I draw on feminist research to question conceptualizations of civil society and rural governance as the springboard for political action. In Section 3, I describe how I went about the research methodologically. Section 4 is an analysis of the implications of the new rural governance on macro relations between the state and local groups as they wrestle with the dilemmas of identifying who is expected to do what, who is in charge of rural development and of the emergence of what might be regarded as a new project class. In the micro-politics of rural development in Section 5, I examine how relations of gender intersect with age and ethnicity to shape development practice on the ground and analyze the spaces for political action carved out by women, beyond the constraints of the existing framework of multilevel governance. In Section 6, I discuss how new forms of rural governance are changing the terms and spaces for democracy in rural Sweden and in the so-called realm of freedom.

2. Civil society and the 'Realm of Freedom'

Theories about the role of associations in influencing political life in society stem from the work of enlightenment scholars, especially that of de Tocqueville. de Tocqueville (1836 (1965)) believed that through associating, the coming together for mutual purpose, people are able to overcome selfish desires, thus making both a self-conscious and active political society and a vibrant civil society independent of the state. In this conception, civil society is a realm of communities of individuals between the state and the family. Tracing the emergence of 'the idea and ideal' of civil society in late-seventeenth and eighteenth century European thought, Seligman (2002) writes that the very term *civil society* entails liberal presuppositions, that is, the idea that society can and should be differentiated into distinct spheres, each of which operates according to its own logic. Part of this liberal ideal was that it would provide a space for the expression of individual and group differences, and hence a realm of freedom.

Since the late 1980s, the idea of the civil society has become much-used by political groups both on the right and left. According to 'neo-Tocquevillian beliefs' (Chambers and Kymlicka, 2002:2) and what Walzer (2002) dubs simply as the civil society argument, the strength and stability of liberal democracy depends on a vibrant and healthy sphere of associational participation. In Sweden, civil society organizing is rooted in the *folkrörelse*, popular movements that arose out of social movements such as the temperance and labor movements (Lundström and Wijkström, 1997). The *folkrörelse*, described by Heckscher as "no less than an economic revolution" (1949:78) formed the backdrop for what he first termed as the corporatist state. Researchers went on to describe Sweden since the 1950s as a 'corporatist' or 'neocorporatist' state (Rothstein, 1992), where interest organizations such as unions, the cooperative movement and employers' organizations co-governed Swedish society through collective bargaining with the Swedish state. They contend that the Swedish case challenged the idea that a strong state or that a large public sector stands in opposition to an autonomous and vibrant civil society (Rothstein, 1992; Trädgårdh, 2007).

There had been a consensus among researchers and in policy in Sweden that to engage oneself in associations is a way for those individuals to promote their interests and to acquire the knowledge and experience that is needed to be able to successfully engage in political life. Associations have been popularly invoked as 'schools in democracy' (DS, 2004:49). According to Trädgårdh

⁴ Rural Development Policy is the second pillar of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). LEADER, *Liaison Entre Actions de Développement de l'Économie Rurale*, means 'Links between the rural economy and development actions.'

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