

Culture Wars in Sweden? The Nordic cultural policy model and the (re)politicization of Swedish cultural policy

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Culture Wars in Sweden? The Nordic cultural policy model and the (re)politicization of Swedish cultural policy

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Abstract: Nordic cultural policy has long been characterized by political consensus. There are now indications that consensus around the Nordic model of cultural policy is breaking up. This article explores current criticism of cultural policy in Sweden, especially from the established centre-right, and the populist right. As new political divisions are becoming increasingly important, cultural policy is becoming a contested area, including a number of symbolically critical issues, e.g. multiculturalism, controversial modern art, and political influence on arts and culture. In current debates, the arm's length principle is still widely supported. Both the right and the left raise claims that open society and the autonomy of arts and culture are under threat; from government regulation and politicization, or from the influence of market liberal, conservative, nationalist, and populist forces. The cultural policy of the nationalist-populist Sweden Democrats stands out in its explicit focus on social cohesion based on Swedish cultural identity.

Keywords: populism, cultural policy, Nordic cultural policy model, arm's length principle, culture wars.

[L]ibraries – perhaps the foremost bastion of civilized society – become laboratories for nationalist cultural policy. For the Sweden Democrats, art and cultural policy is a way to shape collective identity (Lind in *Svenska Dagbladet*, 21 Nov. 2019).¹

Our opponents have forced us into an existential struggle for the survival of our culture, and our nation. There are only two choices – victory, or death. There is only one way, and that is forward (Karlsson on Facebook 12 Sep. 2018, quoted by Callstam in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 12 Sep. 2018).

Swedish cultural policy has long been characterized by broad political consensus, partially because it has only drawn very limited attention as an arena for political conflict. It has even been observed that elections are never won over issues of cultural policy (Klockar Linder 2014, Frenander 2014). There is reason to think that the consensus characteristic of Swedish cultural policy is now beginning to give way to polarization, and re-politicization, with explicit cultural policy (cf. Ahearn 2009) becoming a symbolic battlefield between different visions of national self-identity, and of the societal roles of arts and culture. Some commentators have described this development as an ongoing 'culture war', adding a supposedly new conflict dimension to the Swedish political landscape (e.g. Halldorf in *Expressen*, 7 Oct. 2018, Ullberg in *Dagens Samhälle* 27 Jan. 2020, Johansson 2018). While such conflict may be primarily symbolic in character, it still

¹ Quotes from sources in Swedish have been translated by the author of this article.

offers a prism for researchers to study the changing nature of political conflict today. It may also have significant consequences for cultural policy in Sweden.

The quotes above illustrate how culture is becoming a symbolic issue for politicians across the political spectrum. The second quote is from the leader of the parliamentary group of the nationalist and populist Sweden Democrats. He is referring to the general situation in Sweden, including its immigration and integration policies, but it also implies a radically different rationale for explicit cultural policy, which has been introduced by Sweden Democrats in other contexts. The first quote is from the Swedish Minister of Culture, referring to the library policy of a municipality where the local governing coalition is led by the Sweden Democrats, accusing them of reducing public libraries to instruments for political propaganda in order to mold local and national collective identity. It is also not only the addition of the Sweden Democrats as a significant political party that has shaken the consensus on cultural policy in Sweden; the centre-left government has itself been accused of using arts and culture as a political instrument, replacing the autonomy of arts and culture with culture as propaganda.

This article attempts to analyze an ongoing shift in how cultural policy is understood in Sweden by contrasting the established cultural policy model, and its basic assumptions, to how cultural policy has been discussed in the last few years. The focus of this article is thus on explicit cultural policy, but not on the cultural policies carried out by the government. Instead, I will use examples of debates in the press, and take a deeper look at current criticism of cultural policy in Sweden, especially from the established centre-right, and from the Sweden Democrats. This analysis should be relevant not only to understanding current changes in Swedish cultural policy, or in Swedish politics in general, but also as a contribution to a more general discussion of how cultural policy is impacted by politicization, polarization, and the rise of populism.

The article starts with an overview of the characteristics of Swedish cultural policy, understood as a specific case of a Nordic model of cultural policy, specifically focusing on consensus, the role of the arm's length principle, and its character of a political compromise. After this characterization follows a discussion of other central concepts used in this article, such as 'culture wars', populism, and the idea of a new axis in politics. It continues with an analysis of criticism of government cultural policy in the Swedish press 2016-2020, focusing on voices from the centre-right. Finally, the article offers a more focused analysis of the cultural policy of the Sweden Democrats. The article then ends with a concluding discussion. The article is based both, on previous studies, and on new empirical material in the form of examples from discussions in the Swedish press, and Sweden Democrat policy documents, such as political programs and platforms. Examples of criticism of government cultural policy in the press are taken from leading centre-right newspapers, especially *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*, the main conservative newspaper in Sweden. In order to get a sample of the relevant debates, the research has included all editorials, columns, and opinion pieces on explicit cultural policy published in *SvD* from November 2019 to March 2020, many of which are quoted in the text. Aside from this sample, the analysis also builds on examples of earlier debate, identified by using the sample, as well as previous research.

The Swedish cultural policy model

Whether or not there is such a thing as a specifically Nordic model of cultural policy has been the subject of academic debate for decades (e.g. Duelund 2003, Duelund 2008, Mangset et al 2008, Mangset 2020). In 2008, several Nordic scholars collaborated in a thematic issue of the *International Journal of Cultural Policy* on the Nordic model of cultural policy (Mangset et al 2008). There, they observed as many as ten characteristics, which they considered to be more pronounced in the cultural policies of the Nordic countries than elsewhere:

1. public authorities assume substantial responsibility for cultural life;
2. welfare-oriented support systems to individual artists in these countries;
3. strong corporatist links between these organisations and public authorities;
4. the level of private subsidies to cultural activities and institutions is relatively low, and the level of public subsidies correspondingly high;
5. cultural policy tries to promote equal access to culture;
6. culturally fairly homogenous, which is reflected in cultural policy;
7. cultural policy plays a significant role in the construction and reconstruction of national identity;
8. a distinct socio-cultural turn;
9. local and regional cultural administrations and institutional infrastructures are quite strong;
10. combines relatively strong ministries for cultural affairs and relatively strong arm's length bodies.

In relation to models presented in the research literature on cultural policy, these features makes the Nordic model a combination of the French model, focusing on a ministry of culture, and the British 'arm's length' model; or of the Architect model and the Patron model (cf. Cummings & Katz 1987; Chartrand & McCaughey 1989), combined with a relatively large role for regions, local administration, and interest organizations, but not for market actors. Government control in relation to arm's length bodies is relatively strong in Sweden, but all of the aspects of the Nordic model, as described above, are clearly present (Harding 2007, 2009, Mangset 2015). As in the other Nordic countries, Swedish cultural policy is highly decentralized, leaving local activities to local government. This aspect is even more pronounced in Sweden than in the other Nordic countries; locally organized activities are significant, but largely unregulated in national legislation (Kulturanalys Norden 2018). The previously marginal role of regional government was increased by reforms in the early 2010s, transferring national funding to regional governments for regional cultural institutions and activities (Harding 2007, Henningsen & Blomgren 2017, Blomgren & Johannisson 2016).

The role of interest organizations and popular movement organizations, what could be referred to as a neo-corporatist feature of the model, is also strongly present in Sweden both, in the significant roles played by non-profit organizations in the fields of amateur culture and cultural education, and in the form of interest group representation in the boards of government agencies and commissions (Bennich-Björkman 1991, Blomgren 2017, Harding 2007, 2015a, Mangset 2015). The role of publicly supported non-profit organizations in amateur activities and cultural

education is connected to another significant feature in Swedish understanding of cultural policy, namely *folkbildning*, the education, enlightenment, or cultivation, of the people, originally based in the German concept of *Bildung*. In the context of cultural policy, this idea forms the background to its emphasis on access to culture, in that access to, and activity in, arts and culture is supposed to lead to the cultivated development, both of the individual as a person, and of society as a democratic community. These are activities generally organized either by non-profit organizations, or by municipalities (Harding 2015, Bjurström 2008, 2013). This conceptual background is also why ‘democratization of culture’ in this context has often meant encouraging people to access cultural expressions selected in line with the arm’s length principle, i.e. by experts, artists, and other professionals (Blomgren 2012, 2017, Harding 2015a). Similar concepts of *Bildung*, and popular enlightenment, have been observed also in the cultural policies of the other Nordic countries (Bjørnsen 2009, Harding & Nordvall 2015, Nilsen & Hylland 2018).

The priority of activities specifically related to *folkbildning* and cultural democracy in Swedish cultural policy has been a central part of the expansion of cultural policy within the context of a growing Social Democratic welfare state. In this context, it has been connected with national self-identification with modernity, and to some degree with secularization (Berggren & Trägårdh 2006, Andersson 2009, Harding 2015a). Many of the non-profit organizations involved in this area have their background in the popular movements of the late 19th century, and the first half of the 20th century. Many central cultural institutions, however, predate the welfare state and the rise of Social Democracy. This is certainly true of the Swedish Academy and the Royal Opera, founded in the 18th century, but also of several of the national museums, and the Royal Dramatic Theatre. Some of the earlier institutions were connected to the culture of the Royal court. Many institutions were also part of the reformulation of national identity in the late 19th century. Popular movement organized cultural activities were added to this. Then, arm’s length bodies were added, especially after World War II (Harding 2007, 2015a, Bennich-Björkman 1991, Larsson 2003). In the early 1970’s, most of these institutions were ordered into a more coherent institutional system and placed under a new unified cultural policy (Frenander 2005, Harding 2007). This new cultural policy has sometimes been viewed as a symptom of the radicalism of those days (e.g. Johansson 2017). While this assertion is not entirely unfounded, the objectives of this cultural policy were also a compromise between the more radical proposal of a government commission, and the need to secure broad support in a tied parliament. In the parliament, the Liberals and Conservatives tended to defend the autonomy of the arts and culture sector. The centre-right opposition also had a tradition of prioritizing the established institutions, and the preservation of cultural heritage. The government commission had been concerned mainly with the parts of cultural policy directed at art, or cultural participation, leaving heritage and museum policies mostly untouched. As a result, the cultural policy of 1974 retained most of the established cultural institutions and heritage policy, while at the same time introducing general objectives for cultural policy, and a new Arts Council as a central arm’s length body (Frenander 2005, Harding 2007, 2015b).

Norwegian cultural policy researcher Erik Henningsen (2015) has described this type of process as the ‘sedimentary growth’ of cultural policy, a process where layers are added to layers, while already institutionalized policies tend to remain. Arm’s length and welfare state institutions and policies were thus added to older institutions and policies. The latest layers consist of initiatives

directed at creative industries, cultural diversity, and combating racism and xenophobia. Such initiatives taken in Sweden include e.g. the Museum for World Culture and the Forum for Living History (Harding 2007, 2020), and several initiatives supporting creative industries (cf. Blomgren & Johannisson 2016, Stenström 2008). In the latest government bill on cultural policy, presented by a centre-right government in 2009 (Government of Sweden 2009), few changes were made. The only major change in the general objectives of national cultural policy was removing the objective “to counteract the negative consequences of commercialism” (ibid. p. 28), and thereby signaling a more positive way of looking at the role of cultural industry. While this – together with the previously mentioned transferal of parts of cultural policy to regional administrations – caused the centre-left opposition to vote against the government bill (Riksdag Committee on Culture 2009), most of the preexisting objectives and government agencies still exist, and cultural policy thus largely retains its sedimentary structure. This sedimentary growth of Swedish cultural policy partially explains its tremendous stability and the consensus formed around it among the established political parties. Most major cultural policy decisions have been taken with the support of a broad majority in the Swedish parliament (Harding 2007).

Throughout the 20th century, heritage policy remained more conservative – using the term broadly - in its approach to culture than other parts of cultural policy. The reasons for heritage policy were seldom made explicit (Harding 2007, 2018). One of the few exceptions was in the government bill proposing the current law on cultural heritage preservation, in 1988:

When the individual, in this way, is deprived of his connection backwards in time, his feelings of insecurity and alienation grows. The preservation of historical continuity in the physical cultural environment is thus of fundamental importance to the individual's feeling of security and anchoring in existence (Riksdagen 1988: 301).

This is a perspective where the natural state for each citizen is to be embedded in historical culture, and where losing this connection will lead to alienation. During the last twenty years, there are indications that focus in heritage policy has shifted away from this understanding, towards an emphasis on heritage as a tool in order to deal with current issues, such as the meeting, mixing, and hybridization, of culture in a culturally diverse society. This trend seems to have developed regardless of whether the government was centre-right or centre-left, and may have parallels in other parts of cultural policy (Blomgren 2017, Harding 2020, cf. Government of Sweden 2009). As we shall see, it has still been criticized as a politicization of this previously more conservative part of cultural policy, and heritage policy is now emerging as a central area in what is sometimes described as a ‘culture war’.

Culture wars, populism, and the new political axis

‘Culture Wars’ is a term originating in American political debates, but inspired by the German term *Kulturkampf*, originally referring to the 19th century struggle between German Catholics, and Chancellor Otto von Bismarck’s attempts to create a more centralized German state dominated by Protestant North-German culture. In the American context, ‘Culture Wars’ was established as a term after Patrick Buchanan’s comment at the 1992 Republican National

Convention that “There is a religious war going on in our country for the soul of America” (Davies 2019, Hunter 1994, quote from Buchanan 1992). While in the early 2000’s, the American Culture Wars were already discussed as a historical phenomenon confined to the 1990’s, the term has now returned in reference to new political tensions relating to the Tea Party, Donald Trump, the so called ‘Alternative Right’, and media platforms such as Breitbart News (Davies 2019). In the Swedish context, the translated term ‘*kulturkrig*’ has been used in the press the last few years, referring to a new dimension, and increased polarization, in Swedish political debate (e.g. Halldorf in *Expressen*, 7 Oct. 2018, Ullberg in *Dagens Samhälle* 27 Jan. 2020, Johansson 2018), suggesting a parallel to contemporary American politics. It is the parts of these debates relating to explicit cultural policy that is the topic of this article.

It has been argued that populism, and issues of identity, represent new dimensions in the political landscape, and that unlike the established political struggle between right and left, the ‘culture wars’ are concerned with this dimension. One of the attempts to conceptualize this dimension commonly referred to in Sweden, is the so called GAL-TAN scale, where globalization (G), alternative (A), and liberal (L) values are contrasted to traditional (T), authoritarian (A), and nationalist (N) values, and where this scale is seen as a complement to the mainly financial right-left scale (Ohlsson et al 2016, Oscarsson 2017, Hooghe et al 2002). It is noteworthy that several of these variables relate to culture. It should also be noted that these aspects are not necessarily always connected to each other, even though they may coincide in the same parties today. A similar categorization is the Chapel Hill Expert Survey, which focused on two specific aspects to categorize European parties on the scales of Libertarian vs. Authoritarian values, and Pluralist vs. Populist (Norris & Inglehart 2019). Populism is central to both categorizations, as well as to the discussion around ‘culture wars’. Part of what these categorizations are trying to explain is the (re)emergence of populism in global politics, and the perceived inability of established parties to absorb, or counteract, these movements. Populism can be understood as particular style of political rhetoric (Mudde 2019, Norris & Inglehart 2019). In the following, I will use the term as defined by Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart:

a rhetorical style of communications claiming that (i) the only legitimate authority flows directly from the people, and (ii) established power-holders are deeply corrupt and self-interested, betraying the public trust.” (Norris & Inglehart 2019: 66).

Norris and Inglehart (2019) contrasts this dualistic understanding of society as composed of the ‘people’ and the ‘elite’, typical of populism, to pluralist understandings of politics as composed of a larger number of groups and organizations with competing interests. Populists often characterize the ‘elite’ they criticize as globalist, liberal, multiculturalist, and postmodernist, and often considered to include the dominant actors in the media, and – if to a lesser degree – within arts, culture, and academia. As a rhetorical style, populism can be found in any party, but it is characteristic of the rightwing nationalist populist family of political parties in Europe, a family represented in Sweden by the Sweden Democrats. Many of the parties in this family have also been described as ‘far right’, or ‘radical right’, terms relating to ideological stances towards the primacy of national identity, authoritarianism, and anti-modernism (Mudde 2019, Norris & Inglehart 2019). In the following, the term ‘radical right’ will be used more narrowly, to refer to ideas rooted in a specific ideological tendency based in radical conservatism, authoritarianism,

and ethno-cultural identitarianism (cf. Sedgwick 2017), while ‘nationalism’ is used in reference to any ideology which strongly prioritizes the cultural and political imagined community of the nation (cf. Anderson 2006). Both may overlap with populism, but do not always do so. Since the present article deals with purely qualitative analysis, there is no need to quantify, or connect values, in the manner of e.g. the GAL-TAN scale. Instead, I will focus on the aspects most relevant to Swedish cultural policy model, i.e. the role of arts and culture in a democratic society, and the relation between politics, the people, and the culture sector, in relation to both, the dichotomy of pluralism vs. populism, and that between libertarian vs. authoritarian stances.

Signs that the consensus is fragmenting

In the election of 2014, the Sweden Democrats gained a key position in the new parliament. While the parties to the right of the political centre had a majority, the centre-right was unwilling to form a government dependent on the Sweden Democrats, thus leaving it to the Social Democrats and the Green Party to form a minority coalition government supported by the Left Party. This was the first time since 1957 that the Social Democrats ruled with a coalition partner, rather than alone, and the first time the Green Party was part of a government. The new Minister of Culture was Alice Bah Kuhnke of the Green Party.

In its first national budget, the new government proposed ceasing all funding for the Swedish Institutes in Rome, Athens, and Istanbul (Riksdagen 2014a), research and culture institutions which were entirely dependent on this support. While these institutes are not parts of explicit cultural policy,² the proposal was among the first cases where the government’s policy towards cultural institutions became the target of significant criticism. A Facebook page was founded for the protection of the institutes. It quickly gained thousands of supporters.³ Articles and editorials were written in the support of the institutes (e.g. Andersson in *SvD* 11 Nov. 2014, *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, 12 Nov. 2014). Academics and academic institutions also criticized the proposal. The presidents of the country’s seven largest universities wrote an open letter to government. The issue was also reported to the Parliamentary Committee on the Constitution, for being insufficiently prepared by the government (Riksdag Committee on the Constitution 2014). It was often framed as an example of cultural ignorance in the government, while the institutes were portrayed as central institutions in Swedish academia, especially for archaeology (e.g. Rayman in *SvD*, 23 Oct. 2014, *Uppsala Nya Tidning*, 12 Nov. 2014, Johansson 2017). In the same national budget, the government also proposed closing the Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis, introduced by the previous centre-right government, on the grounds that it was a case of neoliberal New Public Management (Government of Sweden 2014). An editorial in a leading centre-right newspaper commented:

² The institutes are funded via the budget for education and research policy.

³ The Facebook page ”Rädda medelhavsinstituterna” (Eng. ”Save the Mediterranean Institutes”) still exists at the time of writing (“<https://www.facebook.com/medelhavsgate/>”, retrieved 30 Apr. 2020).

Evaluating yourself is generally not the best model, but precisely for this reason it is not a big surprise that the new government has chosen to dismantle this government agency next year (Rayman in *SvD*, 23 Oct. 2014).

The move was thus taken as an attempt to free cultural policy from critical evaluation. Similar, but more limited, protests were mobilized on this issue as well.⁴ In November the same year, the proposal to cease funding for the Swedish Institutes in Rome, Athens, and Istanbul was revoked (Ministry of Education and Research 2014). In December, the entire budget was voted down in favor of the opposition budget – largely because of other issues – thus saving the Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis, as well (Riksdagen 2014). Later national budgets have all retained funding for these institutions.

Two years later, another issue would be discussed in manner similar to that in the issue of the Swedish institutes, namely the merger of three museums in Stockholm – the Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities, the Museum of Far-Eastern Antiquities, and the Museum of Ethnography – suggested as a possible budget measure by Swedish Museums for World Culture (2016), the government agency managing them. Protests once more included editorials, opinion pieces, columns, and Facebook pages.⁵ The still active Facebook page for saving the Institutes around the Mediterranean also supported the efforts. The issue was often treated as a typical example of the cultural policy of the day (e.g. Irenius in *SvD*, 22 Oct. 2016, Wong in *SvD*, 3 Nov. 2016). In most of the oppositional opinion pieces, the issue was framed in terms of expertise in the specific field of each museum being deprioritized by the government in favor of utilizing the museums for political purposes, such as the promotion of multiculturalism in Sweden. Museums as autonomous institutions based in academic expertise were contrasted against museums as tools for propaganda (Harding 2020). Opponents of the government’s cultural policy thus painted themselves as defenders of the arm’s length principle, in the sense of leaving arts and culture in the hands of experts. Much as in the case of the Swedish institutes around the Mediterranean, the government was accused of infringing on this principle without having consulted relevant expertise, or even having general knowledge of arts and culture, while the opposition themselves represented academic expertise, and the educated middle class, which had always been the main audience of arts and culture. As one of the journalists active in this debate claimed in an editorial in a major centre-right newspaper: “the educated middle class appears to be quite alive [...]. What appears to have faced the fate of the Tasmanian tiger is the educated political class” (Wong in *SvD*, 3 Nov. 2016, cf. Harding 2020).

The opposition were not the only ones who claimed to defend the arm’s length principle. One of the main innovations of Alice Bah Kuhnke as Minister of Culture was the introduction of the first Swedish Museum Law, creating legal protection for the status of museums as autonomous institutions (Government of Sweden 2017). In spite of this, the debate would continue. Nor was it limited to issues of heritage and research. Similar debates have concerned film support,

⁴ The Facebook page “Rädda Myndigheten för kulturanalys!” (Eng. “Save the Swedish Agency for Cultural Analysis”) still exists at the time of writing (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/716440468443801>, retrieved 20 May). 2020).

⁵ Facebook pages: “Rädda Östasiatiska museet” (Eng. “Save the Museum of Mediterranean and Near-Eastern Antiquities”), and “Rädda Medelhavsmuseet” (Eng. “Save the Museum of Far-Eastern Antiquities”, the first of which still exists at the time of writing (<https://www.facebook.com/raddaostasiatiska/>, retrieved 30 Apr. 2020).

literature supports, and libraries. The Social Democrat and Green Party coalition government, as well as centre-left regional and local administrations, have been accused of politicizing arts and culture institutions of every kind. Especially since the Sweden Democrats have gained influence locally, the centre-left has done the same, warning about the risk of cultural policy being politicized from the right, and especially from the populist and nationalist right. In November 2019, Amanda Lind, Minister of Culture since 2018, made a direct attack at the Municipal Board of Sölvesborg, a town in southern Sweden governed by the Sweden Democrats in coalition with Conservatives and Christian Democrats:

Here the Sweden Democrats, arm in arm with the Conservatives and Christian Democrats, have decided to remove questioning contemporary art, and replace it with educational art pleasing to SD politicians.

Libraries are no longer an open arena for public education [Sw. *bildning*], where literature in different languages is viewed as a resource. Instead, libraries – perhaps the foremost bastion of civilized society – becomes a laboratory for nationalist cultural policy. For SD, art and cultural policy is a way to shape collective identity, in the way SD wants it to be. Sölvesborg has now turned into their storefront, with Conservatives and Christian Democrats as applauding supporters (Lind in *SvD* 21 Nov. 2019).

The statement is telling in its description of libraries as “perhaps the foremost bastion of civilized society”, and her use of the word “*bildning*”, connected to the central role of public libraries in the 20th vision of cultural policy as a policy of popular enlightenment intrinsically connected to the democratization of society (cf. Harding 2015a, Harding & Nordvall 2015, Bjørnsen 2009), casting the Sweden Democrats as the enemies of that project, and their coalition partners as traitors to it. Libraries had already been referred to in a similar manner by critics of the government, accusing them of removing literature which did not fit in the current ideological climate (Sundeen & Blomgren 2020, cf. e.g. Arvidson in *Expressen*, 23 jul. 2017). Similar criticism has also been voiced in relation to bias in the grants policies of the Swedish Film Institute, and the literature funding of the Swedish Arts Council. In that context, politicians were, however, not viewed as the only agents of politicization. Instead, cultural professionals have been described “public servant activists” using their positions on the basis of their own convictions, to use a term used by Johan Sundeen and Roger Blomgren (2020) in their analysis, where they discuss this issue more in detail. Public institutions are thus described as being politicized from within, possibly under pressure from funding agencies.

In the months following the statement quoted above, followed a series of critical articles in centre-right newspapers, and among critics of the government. In *Svenska Dagbladet (SvD)*, the editor turned the same argument against the funding model inherent in the Nordic model of cultural policy, and especially its Swedish version, i.e. a fairly explicit rejection of the Nordic model from a somewhat libertarian direction:

If politics only had influence on around five percent of funding, as is the case with arts and culture in the USA, it matters less if the president threatens to withdraw funding, or if the funding is accompanied by lists of demands [...] Those who do not feel 100 percent convinced that they would like to see the Sweden Democrat’s culture and media policies in full bloom, have a duty to ask themselves [...]: are there other models,

which we should consider seriously, which would protect culture and media from political whims threatening their freedom to act and develop (Lifvendahl in *SvD* 23 Feb. 2020).

In most cases, arguments were turned against an ideological tendency, rather than at the financial model, and framed as a defense of the arm's length principle. An editorial in a leading newspaper in the second largest city of the country gives an example of how the argument was turned against the Minister of Culture, but also against all of national cultural policy since the establishment of national cultural policy objectives in the early 1970's:

If Amanda Lind, the Minister of Culture, is worried about ideological steering, she should start by looking through the leftist cultural policy the government has had for decades, actually since the 1970's. If she wants to defend a fully liberal view, where the "arm's length" principle is fully enforced, she should start by clearly declaring that the norm criticism of the last few years is abolished, and that the state will now take a much more neutral stand (Pihl in *Göteborgs-Posten* 28 Nov. 2019).

From this perspective, government cultural policy was largely a product of a leftist worldview established in the 1960's, which had taken over national cultural policy and its institutions in the 1970's. This fits into a broader narrative of the consequences of 1968 in the cultural institutions of the West (cf. Johansson 2017). It is also a clear example of how both, the centre-right and the centre-left, present themselves as defenders of arts and culture as an autonomous sphere in society, while at the same time depicting it as being under threat from the opposing political camp.

In March 2020, a Swedish theatre director was asked to lead a debate at Stockholm City Museum, only to have the engagement cancelled because one of the other participants did not want to participate in a public event with someone who had previously had a public discussion with a member of the extreme right. In the following debates, this was taken as an example of how the 'culture of the arts and culture sector' had become dominated by the political left at the expense of freedom of expression (e.g. Josefsson in *Dagens Nyheter* 27 March 2020). As the theatre director herself put it: "Since it is not about competition on a free market, it becomes a matter of competing in having the 'right' opinions, and making the 'right' kind of project" (Oscarsson in *SvD* 17 March 2020). Her understanding of the problem thus included a critique of the combination of ideological norms and the economic power of the grant giving institutions within a New Public Management model. A somewhat different perspective on the same issue was given by the editor of a centre-right magazine:

This reveals a view of ideas which is more reminiscent of the fight against Corona, than of intellectual pursuits: an idea that thoughts are contagious, and that someone who speaks to an extremist, automatically becomes an extremist herself. The real scandal is of course that a public institution accepts this view, and cancels an engagement because of this. Politicization tends to be strongly rejected in [...] Swedish public life. If it is in the wrong direction. If a small town in Blekinge [such as Sölvesborg] wants to acquire classical art instead of Modernist, it is taken a sign that evil itself is raising its head, and know no limits. When an event with a leading Swedish culture personality is cancelled

by a large museum in the capital – not because she is said to be a right wing extremist, but because she has talked to one – there is not a squeak to be heard (Linder in *Forum Access* 27 Mar. 2020.)

This comment stands out in that it takes the Sweden Democrat-led municipality of Sölvesborg in defense. Just a few days earlier, the culture editor of *SvD* had warned that overusing terms such as ‘culture war’ risked increasing the polarization of public discourse (Irenius in *SvD* 23 Feb. 2020). As we have seen, most representatives of the centre-right, in the time period we are looking at here, tended to present themselves as the defenders of cultural autonomy against politicization, both from the government, and from the Sweden Democrats. From that perspective, the accusation leveled against the centre-left government was that of abandoning the arm’s length principle and the general compromise that had been the basis for consensus on cultural policy. For both, the centre-right and the centre-left, cultural autonomy and the arm’s length principle centers on both, respect for professional expertise in the culture sector, e.g. in museum policies, and the ability of artists and other cultural figures to express themselves freely in the public sphere.

The challenge from nationalist populism

The Sweden Democrat party has a more radical background than most Northwest-European populist parties have. At its founding in 1988, many of its members had backgrounds in neo-Nazi organizations. Since the mid-nineties, the party has worked to create a more democratic and conservative image, distancing itself from its radical past. It could now be characterized as a populist and nationalist party, with a focus on limiting immigration (Lindsköld 2015, Erlingsson & Persson 2010, Mudde 2019). According to the first paragraph of its statutes, the party is now “a Social Conservative party with a nationalist basis” (Sweden Democrats 2019). These changes appear to have been tactically successful: since 2010, the party has seats in parliament, and since 2014 in the European Parliament, where they are now members of the group European Conservatives and Reformists.⁶ In the national election of 2018, they became the third largest party in Sweden. (Valmyndigheten 2020, Sweden Democrats 2020).

While the Sweden Democrats remain in opposition on the national level, they have gained local influence in a few municipalities. In the previously mentioned South-Swedish municipality of Sölvesborg, the hometown of their party leader, the Sweden Democrats are leading the local coalition. Part of the attention given to their policies there has consisted of criticism of Sölvesborg’s new local cultural policy. The program of the local coalition mentions “popular support” – as opposed to support only within a cultural elite – as a priority for public art funding. The municipality has ceased funding of what it deems to be controversial art, and instead stated its preference for popularly approved “timeless” art in public spaces (Sölvesborg Municipality 2019:41). The program also emphasizes heritage, identity, and local financial growth as priorities in local cultural policy (Sölvesborg Municipality 2019). While none of these are unique priorities (cf. Blomgren & Johannisson 2016), the Sweden Democrats’ defense of them is

⁶ The European Conservatives and Reformists also include e.g. the Polish Law and Justice Party, and (until Brexit) the British Conservative Party.

somewhat telling. In the words of the national party's cultural policy spokesperson, and its leader in Stockholm County Council:

In an increasing number of municipalities, we challenge the current leftist populist value-governed arts and culture in public spaces. We [...] defend that art is free, as well as freedom of speech and creativity, but when it comes to projects and activities funded by the public, we claim the right to have opinions, and to take the opportunity to state the importance of harmony, popular support, and cohesion (Emilsson & Kroon in *SvD*, 11 Jan. 2020).

While the Sweden Democrats do not openly reject the arm's length principle in national policy documents, there are thus indications that they are not giving it the same weight as it has had in Swedish cultural policies so far. The prioritization of "timeless" art over "Modernist" art (Sölvesborg Municipality 2019) has been connected to a general populist rejection of a cultural elite (Krogstad 2019, cf. Mudde 2019). The mention of "popular support", and the promotion of social, or cultural, "cohesion" and "harmony" as a criteria for public support, suggests that this is not just an aesthetically conservative value judgement, but one that also turns towards nationalism. National cohesion, harmony, and popular support appear to supersede the arm's length principle of leaving such decisions to be judged by experts according to the quality criteria set within an autonomous field. Other parties and political commentators have understood such statements as a rejection of the arm's length principle, in favor of more direct political control of publicly supported arts and culture, in terms of both content and aesthetics (e.g. Lind in *SvD* 21 Nov. 2019, Lifvendahl in *SvD* 23 Feb. 2020). Taken together, these Sweden Democrat views could be described as examples of a mix of culturally conservative, populist, and radical-right ideas, rejecting an international cosmopolitan and modernist elite culture, in favor a more particularist and traditional national culture, as well as of a sharp distinction between these (cf. Sedgwick 2019, Mudde 2019).

More central to Sweden Democrat cultural policy than aesthetics is its emphasis on cultural heritage, and on culture as a means to rebuild social cohesion:

The Sweden Democrats want to defend, preserve, and show Swedish Culture. For us, this includes the fine arts, as well as social codes. Our country needs to gather around common norms and values, collective memories, common myths, celebrations, traditions, and customs, in order to remain together. This is especially important in a society with a solidarically funded welfare model, since the solidarity that keeps the system together is, in turn, based on a common identity and on strong feelings of community. Our vision is that the Swedish culture should be recognized and flourish, instead of being suffocated by left wing liberal wet blankets, or disdain for education and culture (Sweden Democrats 2018: 20).

This paragraph in the Sweden Democrat program for the national election of 2018 creates a strong link between the socio-economic structure of Swedish society as a high-trust society, the welfare state, and the nation as cultural identity-based community. Emphasizing links between social trust, stable political institutions, and culture, is far from unique to the Sweden Democrats, or to national populists. Such reasoning can be found in mainstream social science discourses

(e.g. Putnam 2000). This approach can thus be viewed as a part of how the Sweden Democrats have sought legitimacy for their vision closer to the political centre. Sweden has a history of connecting the welfare state to national imagery, such as in the concept of the nation and the welfare state as a *folkhem*, a 'People's Home'. This was a common approach to the welfare state in its initial phase in the mid-20th century, but the concept also has a background in conservative ideology during and after World War I (Lagergren 1999, Klockar Linder 2014). Compared to mainstream understandings of the relation between social trust, the welfare state, and culture, the Sweden Democrat perspective appears to have a heavier emphasis on cultural homogeneity, common heritage, and identity. One of the party's main slogans is currently "Safety and tradition" (Sweden Democrats 2020), combining ideas of the safety offered by a welfare state and a culturally cohesive society based in the traditions of a national cultural heritage. The party's self-description as 'social conservative' has similar implications.

A similar ideological approach can also be seen in their explicit cultural policy. As noted above, official heritage policy has had an element of using heritage as a means to strengthen local identity by maintaining a sense of historical continuity (Harding 2018). In this sense, Sweden Democrat cultural policy is not necessarily far from centre-right defense of traditional heritage policy against newer approaches in the heritage and museum sector, especially if we compare to how such arguments were formulated by the centre-right – or even the centre-left – for much of the 20th century (cf. Harding 2007, 2018, 2020). For the Sweden Democrats, however, instrumentalist focus on cultural policy as a means to cultural and social cohesion is more emphasized. The following quote from the Sweden Democrat program on what they, significantly, describe as 'cohesion policy', can illustrate the fundamental importance given to this:

It is not feeling for one's own history that creates war and conflict. On the contrary, it is lack of knowledge and feeling for the historical heritage that does this. [...] No group, and no society, especially not a democracy, can function without common ideas, a common conceptual framework rooted in the group's past. In Soviet, after 1917, and in China after 1949, creating a society without attachments to the past was tried (Sweden Democrats 2019: 5).

Here, questioning the need for a common culture and history – "common ideas, a common conceptual framework rooted in the group's past" – is equaled with the Communist revolutions in Russia and China, and their attempts at "creating a society without attachment to the past". A parallel is drawn to the current multiculturalist policies of Swedish governments. While the questioning the multicultural project, or parts of it, is now not rare in the European centre-right, the Sweden Democrats do this within a populist framework of contrasting a multiculturalist elite – including the cultural elite – to the will of 'regular people'. Sometimes even leading Sweden Democrats have taken this a step further, with statements with connotations that are more radical right than merely populist. Kent Ekeröth, a Member of Parliament, for example stated at a demonstration against refugees in Southern Sweden in 2015 that immigration has been the "destruction" of Sweden and addressed the audience as "members of a resistance movement", urging them "to take our country back" (Ekeröth quoted in *Expo*, 19 Oct. 2015, Elgenius & Rydgren 2017). In 2018, Mattias Karlsson, the leader of the Sweden Democrat parliament group,

described the current situation in Sweden in general, and immigration in particular, in terms of existential struggle for national survival:

There is no time for rest, or to mourn broken illusions and hopes. We have not chosen this, but our opponents have truly forced us into an existential struggle for the survival of our culture and our nation. There are only two choices, victory or death. There is only one way, and that is forward (Karlsson on Facebook, 12 Sep. 2018, quoted by Callstam in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 12 Sep. 2018).

Here, implicit cultural policy is no longer discussed within the framework of a consensus based democracy, but as a part of a culture war for the very existence of the nation. Early in 2020, the party leader also described the current political situation in terms of a “culture war” (Åkesson, quoted by Irenius in *SvD* 23 Feb. 2020). If explicit cultural policy is indeed viewed by the third largest party as a weapon in this culture war, or metapolitical struggle (cf. Sedgwick 2019), then there can be no question that at least this party is far beyond the previously existing consensus around the Nordic model of cultural policy as an arm’s length based part of the welfare state. Ironically, this points towards a far less cohesive society than that of the mid and late 20th century, at least in terms of political values.

Concluding discussion

As culture, and cultural policy, have become the object of debate, a number of central assumptions in Swedish cultural policy have been questioned from more than one direction. While Sweden Democrat cultural policy has never been comprehensively formulated – there is no Sweden Democrat national program on cultural policy – there is no lack of statements by leading Sweden Democrats, or in the policy documents of their party, suggesting that upholding the arm’s length principle is not a priority to them. What they indicate is instead an instrumentalist approach to cultural policy, where government involvement in arts and culture is primarily seen as a way to strengthen cohesion in the Swedish national community, understood as a political community based in a common culture, and common cultural heritage. This unity is considered to be under threat from immigration and multiculturalism, where much of the existing cultural policy is viewed as a part of a multiculturalist attack on national culture from a political and cultural elite. These views can also be understood within the context of populist and nationalist ideology, where society is understood in terms of a conflict between a corrupt elite and the people, which in this case are understood as representing the (ethno-)cultural nation. It also corresponds to a broader European populist and radical right narrative where non-Western, and especially Muslim, immigration is viewed as a threat against European societies, and where EU and national elites are considered to either not be dealing with this threat, or actively engineering it, thus creating a situation where cultural policy, as a part of cultural politics, becomes a struggle for cultural survival (cf. Mudde 2019, Norris & Inglehart 2019, Sedgwick 2019).

While the Sweden Democrats do not appear to prioritize the autonomy of arts and culture, both the centre-left and the centre-right present themselves as the defenders of it. In the last few years, commentators from the centre-right have often described the threat as coming both from

the left, and from the populist right, while positioning itself as representative of the educated middle class, defending arts and culture against un-educated instrumentalist politicization. While this criticism of government cultural policy from a liberal, or libertarian, perspective defends the autonomy of arts and culture, and generally the arm's length principle, it simultaneously questions several other aspects of the Nordic model of cultural policy. Much of the Swedish version of this model has centered on the cultivation of the people through increased access to, and participation in, arts and culture, an approach which is connected to both, the role of cultural policy in the reconstruction of national identity, and the socio-cultural turn of cultural policy. Commentators from the centre-right increasingly question these features of cultural policy and view them as illegitimately politicizing culture, either because they are presented as breaking with the tradition of consensus in cultural policy, or because the critics themselves reject the cultural policy model – as it has been established since the 1970's – as representing a politicization of culture. In some cases, this has led to problematizing the dependence of arts and culture on government funding inherent in the Nordic model.

While the centre-left government has itself been accused of increasingly politicizing cultural policy, its Minister of Culture has herself attacked the cultural policy of an individual municipality led by Sweden Democrats. While she was doing this in defense of central values and objectives in national cultural policy, such conflicts have also been taken as questioning the decentralized nature of Swedish cultural policy, illustrative of how this decentralized model has become more difficult to combine with the national objectives of cultural policy when individual municipalities are adopting cultural policies directly contradicting these objectives. While this article provides no evidence neither that the Swedish government is moving away from its established version of the Nordic model, nor that a new centre-right government would do so, it suggests that consensus around the model is breaking up. Current criticism of government cultural policy questions central features of the model from a liberal, or libertarian perspective, while implying that the centre-left is abandoning it in favor of increased politicization and government control. The Sweden Democrats appear to reject much of the model, focusing entirely on the role of cultural policy in the reconstruction of national identity. It should be clear that populism, including the nationalist populism of the Sweden Democrats, is inherently opposed to the arm's length principle in cultural policy. While the arm's length principle is based on elected politicians respecting expert judgements and the autonomy of art and culture institutions, populism mistrusts experts and elites, in favor of the direct will of the people. To some extent, the arm's length principle is built around a de-politization of cultural policy, or at least on a separation of art and culture from the conflicts of party politics, enabling artists and intellectuals to act as independent actors in the public sphere. It thus represents a tacit agreement between the main political parties not to use cultural policy instrumentally against each other's ideological values. Some cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums, have also been traditionally understood as ideally politically neutral and objective. Since such institutions have sometimes also achieved the status of national symbols (cf. Harding 2020, Aronsson 2015), libraries and museums have repeatedly become the focus of debates concerning the politicization of culture in Sweden.

The criticism of government cultural policy discussed above does not only consist of accusations of increasingly detailed and politicized government influence on arts and culture, but also of the

impression that cultural professionals are increasingly acting as civil service activists, e.g. in libraries and museums, i.e. institutions where politicization is viewed by many as being illegitimate. The ability of arts and culture to act as an autonomous or depoliticized sphere in society thus comes into question, as does the roles played by arts organizations as representatives of that sphere within the corporatist structure of the Nordic cultural policy model. This also indicates that the established understanding of cultural policy as a part of a wider national project of popular enlightenment is no longer universally viewed as legitimate, possibly due to a fragmented consensus on national self-identity and the meaning of such a project (cf. Mangset et al 2008 on the relative cultural homogeneity of the Nordic countries in connection to their cultural policy model). It is possible that this consensus was partially made possible by the sedimentary, and thus fragmented, nature of Swedish cultural policy, which enabled parts of the sector to be radically political, while other institutions were viewed as neutral, e.g. as dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage, and to the neutral communication of arts, culture, and knowledge. Ultimately, it would appear that consensus on central features in Swedish cultural policy is breaking up precisely because it is connected to central issues of national self-identity, and views on the ideal role of arts and culture in society. As such issues become increasingly contested, cultural policy is politicized. It could be argued that this is when arts and culture are most needed as an independent sphere in society, but it is clear that upholding such a sphere becomes increasingly difficult, for precisely the same reasons as those making this important.

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