

Anett Schenk

Change and Legitimation –

Social Democratic Governments
and Higher Education Policies
in Sweden and Germany

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For my grandparents

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Introduction

Higher education has become a mega-topic. The emergence of a “knowledge-society” and the growth of knowledge-intense sectors on the labour market have been widely discussed in both political and academic circles. Traditional conceptions of education such as contained in the “Humboldt model”, which depicts the role of universities as being that of providing high levels of general education, of remaining formally autonomous from the state, and of maintaining freedom of research have been contrasted with increasing specialisation and competition found in academic systems. Similarly, emphasising the need of having a highly qualified labour force and arguing for a stronger focus being placed on vocational training in tertiary education contrasts with considering a broad general education to be the highest ideal. A more traditional view of the task of higher education is in the process of being replaced by narrower goals of knowledge-production, of the recruitment of elites in various areas and using education to further societal development as such. Indeed, during the last few decades there are very rapid and dynamic changes in European systems of higher education that have occurred.

In the 1960s and 1970s higher education systems in Europe were enlarged considerably and opened doors to a much broader group of students. This process is often referred to as a change from education primarily for the elite to mass-education, since institutions of higher education opened up for new student cohorts and the academic systems began to grow in numbers of higher education institutions, students and employees – a process, which is still continuing. It is often described in two different terms seemingly opposed to one another, namely diversification and convergence (Rakic 2001; Meek / Goedegebuure et al. 1996). Whereas diversification refers to the ongoing process of redefining the functions and tasks of higher education, which leads to an increasing variety of different types of institutions of higher education, study programmes, modes of financing, employment conditions and governance structures being created. Convergence refers to the observation that – despite diversification – there are

various patterns, ideas and beliefs that different European academic systems have in common. A concrete case in which the latter term is applicable is that of the Bologna process, an ambitious attempt to achieve a greater degree of compatibility between European systems of higher education through the creation of a European Higher Education Area (Magna Charta of Universities 1988; Keller 2004).

My study – in which I analyse developments in the policies of higher education, which Social Democratic governments in Sweden and in Germany, in particular in North-Rhine Westphalia, brought about – is very much inspired by the overall developments referred to and the debates accompanying them. In Sweden, just as in Germany, the expansion of the higher education sector, which took place during the 1960s and 1970s was sponsored and supported by the Social Democratic governments in power at that time, as part of the ambitious reform projects they conducted. Since the beginning of the 1990s Social Democratic governments in both countries have pursued policies aimed at achieving efficiency and international competitiveness in academic systems. During temporary periods of economic decline, goals for reforms in this area were revised. In times of economic scarcity previous reform concepts and ambitions were re-defined and new political concepts were developed. All of this aroused my interest in tracing the changes in Social Democratic policies toward higher education in both Sweden and Germany / North-Rhine Westphalia that have occurred during approximately past 35 years. My aim was to analyse the content of these policies and draw conclusions from this regarding the characteristics and social effects of policy shifts. Doing so was seen as combining two different lines of research. One such line of research has been to examine changes in systems of higher education as indications of changes in “governmental attitudes” and “belief systems” (Braun / Merrien 1999a), changes that tend to imply a redefinition of the basic tasks assigned to institutions of higher education. Whereas prior to the 1980s for example universities were regarded as basically cultural institutions, today they are regarded much more in a rather utilitarian manner, as being public service institutions (Braun / Merrien 1999a). In contrast to the line of research strain concerned with such phenomena, or with styles of governance in terms of different typologies, there

is another line of research, likewise incorporated into the present study, dealing with the question of how specific actors relate to, oppose or reproduce different types of governance and steering. Research has shown there to be processes of adaptation to the situation currently at hand which affect the policies adopted by political parties more general (von Beyme 2000) and Social Democratic parties and by governments in particular (Giddens 1998; Kitschelt 1994). The history of European Social Democracy has been described as a history of revisions of goals, which lead to a “process of de-radicalisation” (Merkel 2001). In a more theoretical sense it can be claimed that Social Democratic parties and governments have often changed what Mayntz and Scharpf term the orientations and motives of actions (Mayntz / Scharpf 1995a). This in turn can either collide with or confirm different types of governance can support certain conceptions of higher education and can reject others. In view of this the analysis I undertake in policies of higher education on the part of Social Democratic governments could be seen as possibly contributing to research on policy orientations of Social Democratic parties, on institutional changes in higher education systems and on relations between institutional changes of this sort and action orientations of the specific actors involved. My motivation to conduct such a study derives both from an interest in ongoing public and political debate on changes in European systems of higher education and from an interest in theoretical questions concerned with the interplay between institutions and actors.

The focus on individual actors and their involvement in processes of policy development, studying this by use of qualitative content analysis is rather unusual in the literature. At the same time, it not only enables a highly detailed analysis to be carried out, but also allows normative questions to be examined. Even in times of ready access to mass-education facilities, a person’s success both in going a basic education and in carrying on research is not fully independent of background variables such as the person’s social background (Blossfeld / Shavit 1993), gender (ETAN 2000) sexuality (Pugh 1998), ethnicity (Essed 2000), health (Potts / Price 1995), age (Maguire 1995) and the status and approach of the higher educational institution the person attends. The academic system also contains structures that produce segregation, making policies of higher education – intended or not – political measures concerned with

questions of justice and equality. I consider the triad of freedom, equality and solidarity as a core issue in the programmatic and normative orientation of Social Democratic parties and governments (Walzer 1997). This is a basic reason for devoting my special attention to policy measures and concepts related to questions of equality and equal chances in higher education.

The major foci of my analysis are changes in policies of higher education shown by Social Democratic governments in Sweden and Germany / North-Rhine Westphalia, changes reflected by the content and normative orientation of such policies. During my work, however, a second line of interest emerged, one I will call the institutionalisation of intermediate bodies and which will address issues of legitimation. Already at the start of my work I was well aware of governments not being the only actors of relevance to policy development. For the sake of my argument, however, I decided to exclude other actors and only focus upon the Social Democratic governments in charge. As my work progressed, it appeared that the policy documents considered should also include documents deriving from the efforts of other actors, such as agencies, expert groups or evaluative bodies. First of all it became obvious that reform ideas and policy conceptions were inspired by reports and recommendations of such bodies. This in turn raised questions regarding the legitimation of policy change. Apparently such changes should not exclusively be justified by external system demands. In order to generate general support or legitimation for their policies governments need to refer to expertise deriving from other spheres than the political. Intermediate actors such as agencies, boards of experts, conferences of university chancellors did provide such expertise. However, a closer look showed there to be different patterns and degrees of involvement in the policy development process on the part of such bodies. Although it is usually assumed that the interests and normative orientations of the actors involved have an important impact on the final policy that is adopted I began to wonder whether the way in which cooperation and communication between the government itself and an intermediate body is institutionalised could be just as important. The research setting of my study and the choice of methods do not allow me to penetrate this question in a very adequate way. Nevertheless, I decided to

include considerations of this possibility in my argumentation with the intention mainly of exploring this avenue of thought.

I decided to use available research literature as a starting point in developing my research questions and line of attack. Chapter 1 provides an overview and discussion of the literature relevant to my study. The major focus is on literature concerned with changes in systems of higher education, processes of segregation within academia, and programmatic changes in Social Democratic parties and governments. As will be shown governance changes in higher education have been analysed intensively earlier in terms of typologies, yet little attention has been paid to the actors involved in the process of transformations within higher education and their action orientations.

Chapter 2 takes up various theoretical matters considered in the study. In order to discuss the relation between the political and the academic sphere I start with the system-theoretical approaches of Parsons (Parsons / Platt 1973) and Habermas (Habermas 1976). Habermas states a legitimation crisis. This crisis is caused by the fact that the political subsystem increasingly intervenes in other social spheres, which also increases the need for legitimation. In this context it is Weiler's notion of "compensatory legitimation" that turns the focus towards the utilisation of expertise in policy making (Weiler 1990, 1983). Finally the actor-centred institutionalism of Mayntz and Scharpf (Mayntz / Scharpf 1995a) provides an understanding of the processes in which governments in interplay with other actors narrow down system demands and orientations of action to concrete motives and policies.

In Chapter 3 the hypotheses and the central research questions of my study and what I conceive my contribution to ongoing scientific debate are set forth.

Chapter 4 deals with methodological aspects of the study, which concerns the policies of higher education of the Social Democratic governments of Sweden and Germany / North-Rhine Westphalia from the mid-1960s to the year 2000. A somewhat unusual method for comparative research was selected, on involving a qualitative content analysis of policy documents. The major advantage of this method is its marked sensitivity to shifts in meaning, as discussed in the chapter in detail.

Chapter 5 serves a double function. As an overview of recent systems of higher education and the political structures and actors involved in policy developments there, it provides as an introduction to the area for the reader. At the same time, the chapter covers far from every aspect of the political and academic structures in Sweden and Germany that may be of interest. Instead, it is meant to funnel the reader's attention towards those aspects of governance and higher education that are relevant for my study.

Chapters 6 and 7 elaborate on different issues connected with the policies of higher education the 1960s and 1970s and of the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Emphasis is placed on the major reforms and measures that were enacted; the arguments presented in favour of them, the basis of these arguments and finally to whom are the measures were addressed.

In the Chapter 8 and 9, the various lines of analysis that have been dealt with are connected and are discussed in comparative terms in relation to the theoretical assumptions made, the hypotheses tested and the research questions considered. Chapter 8 is concerned with the empirical findings and will discuss. The analysis of a wide variety of policy documents in fact indicated a shift in the focus of higher education policies of the Social Democratic governments in both Germany and Sweden. In brief it can be concluded that the concern and orientation of policies of higher education shifted from primarily input to output and from working class generally to women. Nevertheless, references to equality generally, to equal chances in life and to justice still were evident as a basic pattern when Social Democratic governments argued for the reforms and measures they aimed for.

The two countries, Sweden and Germany, differ, however, in the arguments advanced, the measures undertaken and the speed of the changes involved. Chapter 9 leads the discussion towards theoretical considerations. It addresses issues of compensatory legitimation and the institutionalisation of intermediate bodies. In Sweden such intermediate actors were somewhat more closely held to governmental guidelines than was the case in Germany / North-Rhine Westphalia. This became especially clear during the 1990s. In the case of North-Rhine Westphalia, this allowed actors of this sort in the fiduciary and

academic subsystem to have a stronger impact on the political approaches taken and sometimes to endanger measures and conceptions enacted earlier.

In a final chapter, the results of the study are summarised and possible implications of the findings for further research concerned with policies of higher education are discussed.