

Scandinavian Sociology in Context

**Interview with
PD Doctor Patrik Aspers**

**(Stockholm University)
on 7th January 2010.**

conducted by Alexander Dobeson

Q: Mr Aspers, during your academic career you have had the chance to get in touch with different academic environments all over the world (Sweden, UK, USA, Germany). Is there such thing as a Scandinavian Sociology? If yes, what is special about it in comparison to the Continental, Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American sociology?

A: Let me begin by a few, though truly sociological observations, which I also think will make it easier to follow my way of reasoning. Where insiders tend to see differences and diversity, outsiders see similarity. To get by, we construct social categories, and the closer we get, the more of diversity do we see. We, furthermore, need an overview to understand the details, as much as we need the small snapshots to get the picture. This idea of the hermeneutic circle is also the principle of understanding, as presented by Martin Heidegger. I begin with these few lines simply to remind us that we should not forget, when talking about sociology, that we are sociologists. What I say shall be seen in light of these sociological reflections.

We should also remember that sociology was born at a time when modern society was being formed at a rapid pace, and the previously agricultural society was “disappearing”. Sociologists studied urbanisation, classes, labor markets, conflicts – most of which were associated with a gradually modern society. Sociology was also happy to be the tool of the state, by providing guidance for the “development” of society.

My first point, to be a bit more specific, is that there is indeed “a thing” called sociology, and that sociologists all over the world have many things in common. However, this is not what you asked. As an insider, I am almost forced to stress the differences between the countries. There are indeed differences among the different Scandinavian countries. The university systems are not identical, though higher education is free in all of these countries. In Norway, to take one example, sociology is also a subject that many university students have been exposed to prior to entering higher education.

Though sociology was taught in Denmark already in the 1880s, and in most Scandinavian countries before World War II (often by Germans), it was never established until after the two wars (with Finland as the exception). Scandinavian sociology, moreover, was unable to establish a connection to continental Europe, and what we today observe is rather the consequences of a strong American influence. From its start, Scandinavian sociology had a relatively strong positivistic stance. This comes partly

from the philosophical influence on sociology, then from analytical philosophy, and from the fact that many sociologists have essentially been almost like civil servants, actively supporting the construction of the Scandinavian welfare state model. To this multifaceted explanation, we should also add the import of positivistic methods from the US to the Scandinavian countries and the easy access to good quantitative data (provided by the welfare state). These factors, taken together, have further paved the way for one kind of sociology. Several research institutes have worked in a tradition that taps into social policy. It is only more recently, from the 1970s and onwards, that we can see plurality in Scandinavian sociology. Sociology is strong in Norway, and relative weak, but clearly growing, in Denmark due to its late state.

Theoretically, Scandinavian sociology has so far offered relatively little. The strongest impact has been done by sociologists who have studied the welfare states, most notably Gøsta Esping-Andersen (Denmark) and Walter Korpi (Sweden). There are some other sociologists who have made an impact on the international scene, such as Wilhelm Aubert, Hans L. Zetterberg, Aage Sørensson, and Richard Swedberg. The lack of general theoretical contributions can be explained by the pragmatic orientation and the focus on methods and social policy, in combination with a somewhat shallow knowledge of philosophy. I should stress that this is a view that not all sociologists would accept.

It is, in my view, after having spent one year in the UK, one year in the US, and several years in Germany, in addition to the time in Sweden, that Germany (and perhaps France) has the largest potential for major theoretical breakthroughs. Only in Germany do we find a sociology that is willing to listen to philosophical reasoning and that is able to rethink some of the “truths” that over time have become taken for granted among sociologists. What I mean is that many of the ideas of the founding period of sociology, which - to recall - is not more than 100 years

or so behind us, have never really been questioned. Our capacity to reflect on our own path (dependency) seems to be limited. So my answer is perhaps more an attempt to stress the historical-cultural aspects that accounts for what we observe today.

There are national sociological associations in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. What role do they play and how are they connected to each other and to the rest of the world?

The Journal of the Scandinavian Sociological Association (SSA), *Acta Sociologica*, has been the most visible stage for Scandinavian sociology. This is because it attracts authors and readers from all over the world, and that it is not merely a mirror of what is done in the Scandinavian countries. There are today so many associations, national, regional (like SSA), European, and world organizations, which makes it hard for a sociologist to attend all of the different conferences that are organised. The Scandinavian meeting is an arena where at least Danes, Norwegians and Swedes can communicate using their mother tongues, and still be understood by other Scandinavians. The opportunity to speak in one’s mother tongue may be crucial to some sociologists, at the same time, it may create a relatively small bubble. One should also note the value of easily finding people who are able to read, say Danish, in Norway or on Iceland, who may then review applications for a position or a research application.

I think, more generally, even though organisations are formally connected to each other, that our trade, as many others, is mainly characterised by its personal relations. Sociology, at least for me, is a global business. Most of my own sociological contacts these days are with people outside of Sweden. I would argue that the research topic is what glues people together rather than organisations. I know of several interesting collaborations, both between individuals, but

also between research centres in the field I know the best, economic sociology, which have been formed over the last 5 years. This I hope is significant for European sociologists, and this form of “organizational” activities seems to take place largely outside of these larger associations.

Sweden will be hosting the XVII World Congress of Sociology organised by the International Sociological Association (ISA) in Gothenburg, July 2010. The programmatic title of the congress is “On the Move” and is dedicated to a reformulation of sociological questions and answers that go beyond reified determinism and methodological nationalism. What expectations do you have for the congress and how important is it for sociology and sociologists in Sweden and Scandinavia respectively?

This is correct. The last time it took place in Sweden was in 1978 (in Uppsala). This time it will be much bigger, and it is likely that a large number of sociologists will come to Gothenburg. Given the fact that it is also easily accessible from Norway and Denmark, we should assume substantial Scandinavian contribution. I am of course happy that such a large event is localised in Sweden, and Gothenburg in the summer will most certainly be a great venue.

People tend to have different views on how to do a conference. I value the different working groups with paper presentations and the discussions among a group of people with common interests, but hopefully not with the same view. A good conference, in my view, is one where you find an abundance of interesting talks and perhaps mini-conferences. I hope that people will also learn to appreciate the variety that contemporary Scandinavian sociology represents.

What about the future prospects of Scandinavian sociology and Scandinavian Sociologists respectively?

As I indicated, I do not see tendencies of major breakthroughs coming from any of the Scandinavian countries, if this notion is applicable to the social science at all. The increased diversification has created more opportunities, and may pay off in the future. A problem is the low mobility, people graduating at different universities. Here Denmark, with Copenhagen as a major hub, and with short distances, may be more progressive in building interesting milieus, which are also open to incoming ideas. I think also the fact that Copenhagen business school harbours sociologists, as well as people from other disciplines, is exciting, and I hope we can see more of this in the future.

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