



Social Integration and New Realities in the Swedish Welfare Society

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1 Social integration and consumption

During the 19th century a new area of intervention emerged and was identified as “the social question”. This refers to the innumerable problems that authorities identified as resulting from the rapid transition to modernity: mass poverty, prostitution, illiteracy, epidemics, social upset, etc. (Santos, 2002: 45). Social reformers tried to formulate strategies that would reduce or solve these problems. Sociologists captured these processes in the concept of *social integration*. The authorities met these challenges with diverse measures in the aim of incorporating the poor into the national community. The regulation of consumption of the poor played a key role in the confection of this project (Strasser et al. 1998, Zelizer 1994). The poor had to be adapted to what was considered the “right” consumption patterns.

According to the social authorities poverty was mainly the result of ignorance or a consequence of bad habits and an irrational lifestyle (Sjögren, 1997). Poor people were often described as people without the moral strength to give priority to “good” or “rational” consumption. Consequently, the poor were seen as poor because they wasted their resources; their consumption was unplanned and often led to “bad” habits (Horowitz, 1985). More radical economists and social workers argued that the poor lacked the knowledge of how to consume in a rational manner. The economists Simon Patten (1852- 1922) and George Gunton (1845-1919) related consumption to social changes. They assumed increased consumption would facilitate integration, but this potential would be lost unless the authorities regulated the consumption patterns of the poor immigrants as well as nationals. Thus, the poor had to be trained to develop new and appropriate patterns of consumption connected to modern society. Social reformers demanded special programmes to teach the poor about the “right” way to consume. Simon Patten (1909), who advocated increased consumption among the poor in the USA, supported the proposal to create organised leisure time put forward by the pioneer American social worker Jane Adams (1860-1935). Organised leisure time would facilitate access for the poor to the “right” activities including daily consumption.

Consumption soon became an important issue in the handling of the social question in Sweden. The daily consumption patterns of the poor were supervised by health workers, school teachers and social workers. From the beginning of the 20th century professionals as social workers and school teachers developed activities related to the daily consumption of the poor. The places of consumption, the amount of money and time spent, the goods consumed and the quantities, all became subject to constant attention, detailed investigations and intervention (Aléx, 2001). Social workers focused on the daily life of poor people; they collected information, analyzed it and reported on the consumption of poor households and particular attention was paid to the daily consumption practices of households that were dependent on social assistance.

Social workers devoted their working hours to ensure that the poor became part of the nation-state project, and intervened to discipline the poor who did not adapt to the demands of the authorities. The poor who asked for financial assistance were submitted to a detailed examination in order to find out how they spent their money (Sjögren, 1997). The “home visitors” were inquisitive; the social workers inspected the housing and accommodation, the sharing of available space, hygiene, the state of health, access to alcohol and other goods considered unhealthy or unnecessary consumption. Reports like these have always played an important role in the decision-making process of the social authorities on whether to grant the financial benefits applied for or not.

The strategies for the social integration of the poor also contained an element of training based on the association of poverty with ignorance. This was also the background to the consumption training of poor people. The Swedish state promoted and subsidized the activities of both public and non-governmental organisations engaged in teaching the poor about appropriate patterns of consumption (Aléx, 1994). A concrete example is the state financial support to the formation of school staff in teaching about consumption habits (planning and saving) during the first decades of the 20th century. The intended target group were primarily girls; i.e. the future housewives (Aléx, 2003). School teachers transmitted consumption norms, taught consumption strategies and controlled how these norms were followed. Social workers developed working methods focusing on the daily life of the poor – how they spent their money, how they organised their spending, their home space and their leisure time were special issues in the working routines of social work.

Today – more than hundred years later – the Swedish authorities are once again concerned with integration policies, this time the integration of the foreign born population¹. Both in the public debate and at policy level, similar concerns about the consumption of the poor are raised (as at the beginning of the 20th century), but now it is the consumption of migrants is in the focus of welfare professionals of Sweden. The normality taken for granted is the normality of the sedentary society where all inhabitants live in a geographically defined area: the nation-state, populated by people working or looking for work in the formal labour market, households consisting of one or two adults with children under 18 years of age, older children attending school, etc. The “deviance” social workers try to regulate is mainly associated with people without financial resources, the unemployed or those excluded from the formal labour market. In all these groups, migrants are overrepresented (Salonen, 2008).

These migrants in most cases reside in deprived housing areas constructed at the end of the 1960’s or during the 1970’s. Their family constellations, housing situation and consumption strategies do not correspond to “normal” Swedes (Andersson, 2001). It was with field studies carried out in such a neighbourhood that I participated in a Scandinavian comparative research project (Denmark, Norway and Sweden) (Bonke, 2005, Hohnen, 2007). The aim of the project was to identify new dimensions of vulnerability created in a consumption oriented society. The theoretical framework was inspired by Bauman’s theory of social exclusion created in a society based on consumption (Bauman, 1998, Bonke, 2005). This article is based on some of the interviews I conducted in a low-income neighbourhood in Malmö. 20 interviews were done with adults representing families with children of school age, an additional 10 interviews were done with school teachers and social workers. The interviews

¹ In 2005 the Swedish population was 9 047 752, then there were 1 330 000 foreign born persons living in Sweden and an additional, 1 700 000 person with foreign background, i.e. with one or both parents born outside Sweden SCB.

were focused on two issues, the household consumption conditions (A) and the strategies of consumption (B).

A. Consumption Conditions	B. Consumption Strategies
Family composition?	Priorities and conflicts
Incomes and expenses?	Organisation
Housing history and housing situation?	Actual situation and/or managing of housing changes.
Access to household services refrigerator, dishwasher, computer, internet etc, etc?	Network: obligations and/or support?
Access to car and/or other forms of transport?	Network: obligations and/or support?
Employment situation?	In a situation of unemployment,
Regular expenses	How to make ends meet? How to handle difficulties to pay the bills? How to handle unexpected expenses?
Financing possibilities: loans, credits and other obligations and possibilities	Informal and formal financial support
How often are you shopping? Which items are brought where, etc	Shopping routines
Grocery stores in the neighbourhood, transport possibilities	How do you view the future? Opportunities/obstacles?
Consumption of health services	Consumption in difficult situations such as illness
Recreation: daily activities, holidays and parties	Last summer vacations?, free time

The interviewees, many of whom depended on economic support, had daily contact with social workers and school teachers as they had children at school. The interviews with social workers and teachers were focused on their perception of the conditions and strategies on

consumption of the households living in the area. Of the 20 interviewed, 8 persons had migrant backgrounds and this article is based on these 8 interviews (and the 10 with social workers/teachers), which were conducted in various languages; English, Spanish, Swedish and – with help of an interpreter – Arabic). The interviewed teachers worked in preschool and primary school, while social workers came from the welfare office localised in the area. In the following pages I analyzed the interviews from the perspectives of both professionals and migrants.

2 Managing consumption

The control of people depending on welfare is part of administrative routines of social workers. School teachers also participate in these processes of public control. They take notice of both the consumption of parents and children. Through contact with the children, teachers and other members of the school staff control parents. There are institutionalised routines for the exchange of information about the situation of the pupils within the school system. These meetings are attended by head teachers, leading school staff, school nurse and school social worker. Family situation, the children's daily routines, their eventual deviant conduct and habits are discussed in these meetings. Information about clothing, recreational activities, holidays, etc. makes consumption an important area in the process of the evaluation the children's school situation and their parents' responses to school demands. Where family of a pupil receives welfare benefits, social workers at the welfare office have to investigate how these families spend their money. In their work, both school teachers and social workers focus indirectly in household consumption when they evaluate the adaption of the families to what they perceive as a normal way of life. Thus, they participate in the construction of deviance and normality, often in the same way as the pioneers of social work did a hundred years ago. The dominant perception of both social workers and school staff were that the families in the area lacked money and/or the resources to manage their situation in a rational way; the professionals often concluded that, the parents needed guidance and/or education.

The adults of the families I interviewed conveyed a dynamic picture when describing how they chose local services (for example local markets) for their own use, and how they related to each other in order to create opportunities for daily consumption. Their descriptions illustrate how networks across national borders emerge and are maintained. These new social practices are difficult to detect and understand for social workers, who see only the target group as being close to social marginalisation and locked into a geographical area (Hjort, 2004). The migrants I interviewed described a dynamic daily life in search for solutions to their daily consumption. In search of welfare they had created consumption strategies in both the local and the transnational context. In these ways duties, obligations and possibilities connect people into networks extended to different parts of the world. The possibilities and opportunities produced by these strategies are not recognized (or understood) by the narrowly-based integration projects as defined by social researchers, politicians and social sector professionals, and therefore, do not influence the prevalent pessimistic picture of the supposedly hopeless exclusion of migrants living in these areas.

3 Consumption of goods

In their descriptions of the consumption of the families living in the area, school and welfare staff distinguish between necessary and unnecessary goods. In these descriptions the children are presented as victims of their parents' excessive or disordered spending.

“I mean, this is a question of priority. Many children come to school without having had anything to eat, but they can buy mobile phones or other things that are in fashion today.”
(Primary school teacher 1)

“They don’t know how to manage their money so it will last so that they can buy their basic necessities for the whole month. They spend all their money the first few days and after a week they are without money.”

(Preschool teacher 2)

“In this school we have children who wear new clothes and have new toys the first day of the month and the same children come to school without having had breakfast because they do not have any money for food. This is a small group...then you have the others who shower the children with things ...all that they see on TV...”

(Primary school teacher 2)

“I remember a child who always had few or inadequate clothes...and suddenly his parents bought a satellite dish ...7 000 SEK...and other similar cases, children with torn clothes whose parents give priority to other things...”

(Social worker 1)

The daily routines are the focus of a strategy that tries to confirm the differences and often the perception of these families as deviants. The short-term consumption described by the migrants interviewed reveals an expert knowledge about the opportunities for household consumption inside and outside the area.

“There is a supermarket on the other side of the city, it opened some months ago, and they sell cheap vegetables. From the welfare we get a bus pass, we take the bus and a little trolley to pack the goods in; we get there and buy what we need.”

(Father, five children. Irak, two years in Sweden)

“My father knows how to buy cheaper...Now he is retired and drives to Germany to do business. He sells wine he buys in Germany and finances the trip...he buys cheap food and gives it to us.”

(Single mother, one child, born in Sweden, father from Rumania)

These strategies presuppose knowledge about goods, shopping centres, transport and the routes of transport. It is the kind of knowledge that the welfare officers do not (and often can not) provide for their clients. This knowledge circulates in local networks in which newly arrived migrants get information on consumption places and cheaper shopping opportunities. Migrants use the local opportunities for welfare and the appropriate local knowledge to try to make ends meet. Local and also transnational bonds are formed in connection with the consumption of goods.

“We buy clothes when we are in Pakistan or in the USA...my family also sends gifts.”
(Mother, 3 children, Pakistan, 10 years in Sweden)

Strategies for consumption do not only require money. Transnational family ties also create the opportunities for short-term consumption.

4 Leisure time

According to the school teachers and social workers there are places which Swedish people in general and migrants in particular “should” visit during their leisure time. The interviewers see the migrant families as victims of social isolation without connection to other places, i.e. the places considered part of the “Swedish landscape”. The fact that some migrant families organise their daily lives in a local and transnational space is ignored or even seen as an obstacle to the migrants’ integration into the Swedish society. The school and welfare staff evaluates the daily life of these families according to old parameters of poverty and welfare.

“I mean it is tragic because these children don’t know the city, they only know this area...we went to the town centre last month and we noticed that they don’t visit the town centre with their parents...yes, and during the festival..., but the museums and other places in the centre are unknown places to them.” (Primary schoolteacher 3)

This understanding inevitably leads to a very pessimistic image of the families living in the area; people are perceived as victims of their own “irrationality” or victims of structural changes which they are unable to influence. These interpretations are based on the premises of an obsolete normality which presumes that daily life is carried on in fixed places and only in connection with some urban places. The welfare officers also looked at social life in the geographic location of the city and in some cases only within the housing area.

However, migrants maintain their family relationships also in transnational contexts; a man born in Sweden whose parents immigrated to Sweden from Latin America in the 1970’s gives an example of the dynamic social life when he describes his earlier family holidays:

“I travel to Brazil as many times as I can, not as many times as I would like. In 20 years I have been there three times. Before my divorce I travelled to Greece, to my wife’s relatives. Her mother lives there. We need to pay only for our tickets, she helped us, we came to her house, we didn’t spend any money there, and we went there once a year. Our children were there every summer holiday.” (Single father, 2 children, living in Sweden since he was 11)

The biography of the interviewee illustrates part of the Swedish migration history. This man and his wife are children of two migration movements, the organised labour force recruitment in the 1960’s and refugee migration from Latin America in the 1970’s. They are “the second generation”: they have grown up in Sweden and have a strong sense of belonging to this country but they maintain a close connection to other countries through family relationships. They take advantage of the opportunities provided by these networks, opportunities for their children and themselves.

These relationships provide the opportunities that question the assumption that these people are only socially excluded and/or social outsiders. Spending holidays in Southern Europe is highly appreciated in the Scandinavian countries, shopping for clothes or new technology products in the USA are highly regarded by teenagers.

5 Otherness and other norms

The consumption practices of migrants are commonly described in terms of cultural and/or ethnical differences. In a historic perspective it is interesting to compare current perceptions

of migrants with the older perceptions of people dependent on social assistance. Social historical research shows that also the poor in Sweden were regarded as culturally different. During the 19th century, the term “the other nation” was established in public debates on the social question (Petersson, 1983). The proposals for change put forward by today’s school teachers and social workers use similar representations and have similar contents to the proposals created by school teachers and the social work pioneers at the end of the 19th century.

“I think it is a question of knowledge and education, those who know what a good diet is for children, it is also a question of learning; how to spend your money, how to manage your resources, buying big packs is cheaper, you can divide them into smaller portions for daily consumption at home ...” (Primary school teacher 1).

The interviewed migrants described relationships of mutual assistance between the members of extended families living in the area, the city or in other countries. They described the expectations of economic support from relatives, or difficult situations when relatives ask for their economic help. In some cases it creates daily anxiety when they can not meet the expectations of significant others.

“Recently things have become so difficult. My mother is very ill and I can’t help her. I become so depressed because I can’t help her, she needs money for her medicines and she does not have it, she can’t get any help in Morocco...” (Mother, 3 children, Morocco, 5 years in Sweden)

Distance is a problem for this woman who describes how the lack of money could have been compensated for by practical assistance. Other migrants describe situations where transnational relationships create opportunities to facilitate or solve serious problems.

“When dad became unemployed...we lived in bad, very bad conditions...it was misery the first year. We paid a high price, we paid with our health. Our son and daughter live in the USA with their families. Our younger daughters became ill, they had a very bad time, and we sent them to their sister in the USA. She had just a little money but for the younger ones it was a good change, they recovered and stayed there for more than a year.” (Mother, 6 children, Palestine, 30 years in Sweden)

The interviewed families developed strategies from few opportunities. In many cases these opportunities are embedded in networks extended to significant others living far away yet present in their daily lives. They borrow money from their relatives because the banks do not lend to them, and they share expenses or create local networks to overcome economic problems.

“We are 10 families who save together. We used to save in this way in our country. Each family gives 1000 SEK each month, we save 10 000 SEK each month. It goes round and after 10 months we can dispose of this sum without paying interest. If we need it in a more urgent situation we can use it because the others understand that and we skip going to the welfare office.” (Mother with 3 children, born in Pakistan)

Migrants also describe the difficulties and suffering that arise when a lack of money impinges on handling.

“My husband ...he wants to travel to Ecuador, his parents are there...he wants it so much but it is so expensive!” (Swedish woman, husband from Ecuador 4 years in Sweden)

But distance and a lack of money have also stimulated the emergence of new markets (Tarrus, 2007). Daily contact with relatives and significant others is possible today because of access to cheaper phone cards or to the Internet, so it is possible to maintain old relationships and establish new ones.

“We connect to the Internet daily and link up with our family in Pakistan and the USA...it is very cheap, we meet them and talk for at least one hour every day... “ (Mother with 3 children from Pakistan)

These meetings presume knowledge, knowledge of the market and of the routines in the use of these technologies. Knowledge is updated by both the newly arrived and older inhabitants.

“I changed my phone company from Telia to Telecom. Telecom is cheaper, much cheaper. I make a lot of calls because I’ve married a woman living in Brazil. We married last December; I called her many times, more than I could pay for. Then someone told me about the phone cards, these special cards that you use for making telephone calls to other countries, it is not so expensive any more. You find them in “Arab” stores; also smaller shops are selling them today. Fantastic phone cards, 100 SEK and you can talk for many hours. I used to pay 3 000 SEK, I didn’t know about these phone cards then and when the bill came, I became ill!” (Single father, Latin America).

The internet and telephone cards open up the possibility of maintaining and (also) developing long distance relationships (Vertovec, 2004). Phone cards for local and international calls were also sold in the new supermarket that opened in the area in 2004, a store with Arabic speaking staff and a supply of goods that meet the existing demand in the neighbourhood.

Migrants describe their conditions and strategies for consumption. They explain how they organise their lives according to their new conditions (as newly arrived or as unemployed, as divorced or newly married, etc). They have developed strategies shaped by past and present conditions, strategies from other contexts can be useful when institutionalised welfare policies do not work (Espvall, 2010). Their search of welfare creates new markets, changes local contexts and maintains relationships in a transnational space. The basis for welfare officers’ understanding is still the Swedish institutionalised welfare state where relative immobility is the norm. The strategies for migrants’ consumption are developed in local and transnational contexts. In these processes the premises that justify established welfare institutions are questioned.

6 Challenges to welfare policies and social work

Professionals of welfare work from a normative system in which the assumptions about migrants as *in -migrants* and *poor* are taken for granted. Economic vulnerability is defined using the same normative criteria as used to describe the poor at the beginning of the 20th century. According to this view, the poor have to adapt to scarcity and consume carefully. Migrants in need of welfare allowances are also perceived as culturally different, i.e. deviant, and as different or deviant they must adapt to “Swedish” consumption patterns. Poverty and difference justify interventions which contribute to the construction of otherness. Migration as a way of organising the daily life is an ignored strategy; migrants are seen as immigrants and victims of structural changes who have to learn Swedish and adapt to “Swedish” norms. The

paradox is that these professionals have access to migrants' daily lives. This contact should provide them with new knowledge about the social reality of these families. However, this knowledge is difficult to absorb, since the work of both school teachers and social workers is based on the premises of the national welfare institutions. The questioning of these premises is illustrated in this article by the consumption practices of migrants.

Migrants organise their daily lives in a dynamic way. They acquire knowledge about the local opportunities and they use their transnational networks to build their welfare. Seen from this perspective migrants can be in a more advantageous position than their Swedish neighbours. They have knowledge that gives them possibilities outside the institutionalised Swedish welfare solutions. Their welfare strategies (illustrated with examples from their consumption strategies) start activities that are changing the social and economic landscape. Understanding these changes implies that the assumptions taken for granted about migration, poverty and welfare are questioned.

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