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Nostalgia for Futures Past

The Politics of Generational Memory

In his book *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, British anthropologist Anthony Cohen argues that communities are symbolic constructs (1985).¹ People gather around symbols in the belief that others interpret and ascribe the same meaning to these symbols. Thus, what people share in the community is not a common interpretation or a set of common values, but a belief that they do so. An illustrative example are the national flags. In one flag, people will from different viewpoints store ideas of democracy, equality, racial purity or cultural pluralism, great pasts and pitiful presents, or vice versa. The polysemic character of symbols, their ability to open up to an endless variety of interpretations, is what makes them such strong bases for community. A problem for any community then is how to secure interpretation from arbitrariness. Cohen sees this as the reason why communities do so much work on elaborating borders (cf Barth 1969). Through clear distinctions against others, it is possible to show which interpretations and values work and which don't. Among the kinds of symbolic centres of community Cohen discusses "folk histories" or "meta-histories".² These are selective constructions of the past that usually rather provide a source of action and change in the contemporary world than make the members withdraw from present demands (Cohen 1985:99). In the following I will discuss how a kind of "folk history" is created in popular music events among Swedish senior citizens, and how this might be seen as the core of a generational community in the making.³ But I shall also point out some of the "limits" of such generational memory politics, both in terms of its uses and in terms of its possible consequences.

Remembering the War Years and "Folkhemmet": Retrospective Utopianism

Even if the word "pensioner" entered the Swedish language around a century ago, the modern old age pensioner in Sweden came about through a series of socio-economic developments during the 20th century. In the early 1940's, two larger organizations were formed, both with three

¹ I thank Professor Don H. Doyle at Vanderbilt University, Professor Barbro Klein at Stockholm University and SCASSS, Uppsala, and my wife Charlotte Hyltén-Cavallius, Stockholm University, for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

² NB that he uses these concepts in Malinowski's sense.

³ In this text "generation" refers to people born during a limited period of time and thereby sharing historical experiences made at a similar age, as in popular concepts such as "Generation X" or "the Baby boom generation".

basic aims: to provide its members with activities for general well-being, to put forward pensioners' issues on the national political agenda, and to give advice, support and service to members in specific situations. These aims are theoretically distinguishable, but within the organizations' everyday practice music, activity, support and politics are intertwined. At weekly meetings for example, songs are sung that carry messages both of political unity and ideas about how to stay well as long as possible. Today pensioners' organizations gather nearly 40 percent of the 65+ age group in Sweden, and provide a wide variety of activities, from organizing voluntary social work to arranging nationally broadcasted music competitions. The field of musical entertainment is of course well developed, with anything from "senior dancing" to accordion clubs, concerts with legendary artists and seniors' choirs.

In June 1995 I witnessed an event called *Seniorchansen* or "The Seniors' Opportunity". This is an entertainment competition that has been organized by Sweden's largest pensioner's organization since the early 1990's. "The Seniors's Opportunity" consists of ten qualifying competitions followed by a final with the winners from the earlier competitions. This was arranged at *Skansen*, an open-air museum in the middle of Stockholm that from the late 19th century up until today has been an important stage in Swedish popular music and still retains an exceptional status in public consciousness.⁴ Hosts for the show were Ulf Larsson, a well known Swedish comedian, accompanied by two elderly ladies from show-biz, the 84 year-old Annalisa Eriksson and 80 year-old Sickan Carlsson, and - of course - an ensemble consisting of double-bass, piano, accordion, violin, drums and occasionally semi-acoustic guitar. Through singing and talking about memories from showbiz the three together articulated a backdrop for the competitors. Apart from the hosts' acts only one contribution was non-musical, and the contestants' contributions just as the music from the hosts basically belonged to two categories. One was the old evergreens – songs with a background in films and musicals from the 1930's, 40's and 50's with characteristic cheerful harmonies and melodies reminiscent of the high romantic era. The other was popular tunes from roughly the same period in an idiom related to a music with roots in the late 19th century today known as "old-time dance music", and here the accordion plays a dominant role. A majority of the melodies were cheerfull, and the lyrics often strikingly optimistic. In one song

This understanding is similar to Mannheim's idea of "cultural generation" (Mannheim 1953), and lies near concepts such as "cohort" and "generational cohort" (Schuman & Scott 1989, Kertzer 1983).

⁴ Skansen has been the cradle and centre of many nation-wide celebrations, such as the Swedish national day, Saint Lucia, and the nationally broadcasted welcoming of the New Year on New Year's Eve. Apart from the "Senior's Chance", *Skansen's* year-long program contains events such as the "Pensioner's Day", the "Sweden-Finnish Day", the crowning of "The Swedish-American of the Year", or National Day Celebrations of other Nordic countries. During summer, Skansen hosts perhaps the most popular TV-show in late 20th century Sweden, Lasse Berghagen's "Allsång på Skansen".

Sickan Carlsson shouts out the phrase "show up a happy facade!". The overall acoustic landscape through nearly the whole event belongs to yesterday, and invites to collective retrospection. This framing is only broken for a short intermission by a modern dance-band introduced in terms of a "youth band". But in this context, the short break of temporal and generational perspective seems rather to confirm the nostalgic frame of interpretation than to overthrow it.

But what then do the hosts say about yesterday's showbiz? First of all years are important, the world war two years in particular. Sweden was never militarily engaged in the second world war. However, from April 1940 when the Nordic neighbors were invaded until the end of the war, Sweden was in constant preparedness in all areas of society, from the government and the armed forces to the entertainment industry. So, the two ladies reminisce about tours they conducted in Finland, entertaining the Finnish troops in their long war against the Russian army, and about films they completed during the war. Taking into account that the whole event is preceded by a political speech on present issues from the leader of the organizing pensioners' organization, it is tempting to see the portrayed war years as a critical allegory on the current situation of the gathered pensioners. And the moral of the story of the war years becomes something like: external hardships tie people together – the outside world is tough but together we can make it.

There is another important historical context to bear in mind here. The very same period is also on a political level one dominated by the rhetorical figure of *Folkhemmet* or "The People's Home", a metaphor for national unity, warmth and solidarity. The idea of *Folkhemmet* originated in conservative discourse in the late 19th century, but was taken up by the social-democratic leadership in national political discourse during the late 1920's and soon gained a strong position in both political rhetorics and in popular imagination (Hettne, Sörlin & Östergård 1998:209-212).⁵ Ideologically, it stood for the utopic idea of society as a home, or perhaps even a family. Part of its force lay in that it was never realized but always argued about, struggled for and constantly portrayed as a future outcome of present social reforms. And its rhetorical force is still strong, not least since the early 1990's when it made a comeback as a portrayal of something that was, but had been lost. When the war years are elaborated in *Seniorchansen*, it is also this optimistic, future-oriented spirit of the era that is used. The nostalgic frame that is so carefully built up in everything from acoustics or the frequent up-tempo march rhythms to the talk of show-biz,

combines with the optimism that once was, and unite to make an even stronger force, usable in today's political struggles of the pensioners. That highly emotional tying together of time and place we refer to as nostalgia doubles with the past utopia – a concept on the contrary implying placelessness⁶ - in something of a synergy effect. And perhaps this is a much more common aspect of retrospection and nostalgia than is commonly admitted, namely that looking back provides us with past futures – and thus – alternative presents.⁷

Politics of Pastness: strategic nostalgia in performance

A couple of years ago I conducted fieldwork for my PhD thesis in a small industrial town in central Sweden. Among other things I observed two senior's choirs connected to the two major pensioners' organizations, one of which has its roots in the labor movement, and the other with affinities to liberal parties. At first I was struck by the similarities to the contest that I had witnessed some years earlier. It was the same tendency to older songs, even if the genres were different. The past seemed to be, if perhaps not as foregrounded as in the competition, at least a recurring theme in the choice of songs and in some of the discursive framing of them in rehearsals and in performances. Not to mention the nostalgic, longing mode of the few modern songs. After this initial recognition however, I gradually became aware of a dynamic and complex interplay especially during rehearsals. The participants seemed to be involved in a constant struggle over defining the interpretive frames of themselves and the situation they found themselves in. Was this an event relating to the past or to the present, were they themselves dwellers in the past or in the present?

The leader of this choir was a woman in her early 60's, a church organist trained at the Royal Academy of Music in Stockholm. Perhaps it was her closeness to the religious communities of the town that had rendered the choir a space for rehearsals in the basement of the town's Missionary Church. Her repertoire was also heavily biased towards religious music, from old school songs for children to songs from the French taizé-movement. Other significant traits were music programs around a specific composer, during my stay the early 20th century lyricist and

⁵ According to historian David Gaunt "Folkhemmet" even gained force from a syndicalist left critique of social democratic social politics (personal communication 1998). The consequence of this concept on popular feelings of national belonging is discussed further in Hettne et al 1998.

⁶ From the greek "ou topoi" – lit. "without place/non-place".

⁷ The list of scholars who seem to equate nostalgia with reflexive absorption and even conservatism is long, e.g. David Lowenthal (1985), John Gillis (2001). However, what I think is a growing tendency in recent years is a perception of nostalgia as a rather dynamic force in social process and a motor in social change (cf especially Boym 2001, Johannisson 2001, Kildegaard 1995, Klein 1990).

songwriter Dan Andersson. An evident problem in most contexts where non-pensioners or people under 65 work with pensioners in non-institutional forms is the age issue. The leader of this choir would in small-talk between songs take up issues that would make her more like the pensioner members – complaining about illnesses, commenting on the risks of being a pedestrian on snowy sidewalks, and so forth. Her most frequent kind of comments dealt with the choir’s performance – tones where the men would have to sing louder, short glissandi that didn’t work or parts where they weren’t synchronized enough. But every so often she would start talking about life in the countryside in the old days. Usually this referred to a song or a composer: in the case of the Dan Andersson program she mentioned how she herself came from the same area in southern Dalecarlia, and then go on and tell about the house where she grew up. Another time she came in on the topic of the electrification of the Swedish countryside, and told herself how she had experienced it, and yet another time she told a proverb she had learnt from her grandfather. The past was also used to single out the Non-swedes in the group. The two men came from the neighboring countries Norway and Denmark, and the Norwegian man had lived in this town since the late 1940’s. In relation to one song she mentioned that they would probably not know it, as it was sung in Swedish primary schools long ago. As it turned out, at least the Norwegian man said he knew it very well, as it was sung in Norwegian in his primary school too. Both the music, and the leader’s verbal framing, thus pointed backwards to supposedly exclusively shared pasts. But what about the members of the choir? Of what I could hear they hardly ever touched upon the past when talking to each other. What was *really* discussed, on the contrary, was such things as the weather, or sharing news of common friends in bad health. A few of the men would pull jokes, sometimes on the titles of the songs, sometimes ironizing my academic education or commenting my peculiar presence as a fieldworking student. At coffee-breaks, a central point at all rehearsals, I would together with the members be engaged in discussing news, politics, children and grandchildren, but never experiences from a more remote past.

In public performances – at old-age homes, geriatric care institutions, churches and meetings with the organization, the repertoire itself sometimes framed by a few words on the composer or the theme of the song – this whole doubleness of pastness and presentness was erased. Here was a choir performing songs from the past, songs firmly placed there by the leader’s words, the members quiet between the songs and with a posture often stiff and rigid from stagefright inadvertently signalling stillness or withdrawal. I can only interpret this in one way: old people are in so many areas of life associated with memory. The most extreme popular images of old age

refer to reminiscence, on the one hand the wise storyteller, a fountain of lived history, on the other hand the demented, lost in a chaotic situation of temporal placelessness but reachable through supposedly intact memories from the distant past. In social gerontology and the sociology of ageing, ageing is portrayed in terms of transcendence of the present (Tornstam 1994) and “nostalgia” as the key to understand the ageing body (Turner 1995). The Finnish folklorist Ulrika Wolf-Knuts has pointed to how nostalgia once was associated to adolescence but over the 20th century has shifted toward the elderly (Wolf-Knuts 1995). In geriatric care and specialized housing for the aged, the “reminiscence attitude” is standard, from restaurant’s menus (C. Hyltén-Cavallius 1999) to furniture (Lundgren 2000). Taking this monumental linking of old age to reminiscence into account, it seems that to communicate in public they *had to* perform memory, because that was what was expected of them.

The Limits of Generational Memory: Nostalgic Interfaces and the Prison of Memory

I like to think of this nostalgic, reminiscing framing of musical events, in particular when coupled with a backward-looking bias in the repertoire, in terms of a specific kind of aesthetic interface. The interface is an attitude in aesthetic activities enabling one group to interact and communicate with others in terms of a group or a community. This surface places certain demands on all who wish to participate, and these demands will shape the performance of anyone who wishes to be heard or seen within the interface. In the case of the pensioners’ choir, it seems clear that pastness or nostalgia belong to the demands that shape the performance.

This idea of an interface is not entirely new: it is similar to a passage in Berger’s and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge. Here people interact with typified others within typified situations, implying that people enter interaction with expectations on how people will behave and how situations normally evolve (1966:43-48). It also echoes Erving Goffman’s view of social performances as celebrations of the values of the community (1959:35). When keeping in line with interfacial demands one has to act in accordance with widely held views and prejudices on the group one acts within. What if it is some kind of interfacial behavior that is going on in the events I have described – does it have any consequences for those involved? I would propose two possibilities, and I believe that they are both valid here.

On the one hand, as has been noted for decades within e.g. symbolic interactionist sociology, ethnomethodological sociolinguistics and folkloristic performance studies, all kinds of interaction places upon its participants a set of *both* possibilities *and* restrictions. Many of these are also

essential for any communication to be possible. When groups of people act in the public sphere in accordance with the beliefs of the larger society, they not only celebrate the larger community's values, they also perform a public *mask* that aligns with these values. Behind this "interfacial mask", the complexity and constant negotiation of pastness-frames of the rehearsals can go on rather undisturbed. Seen in this way, the interface creates an internal scene that is quite unaffected by exterior ideas about ageing and reminiscence. On the other hand however, if "masking" is really going on it might even so very well reinforce any widely spread ideas relating old age to reminiscence.

What then, to address the larger topic of this conference, are the "limits of the past" within my field? Within pensioners' events, the past is constructed as a temporal homeland, a place filled with sounds, colours, tastes, faces and objects that people who have reached a certain age can remember, and a place that they together with their co-generationalists have left behind.⁸ When one goes back to past utopias, the present not only is placed within perspective, but one also hints at a parallel, alternative present. The nostalgic, longing interpretation of the past accompanies the optimistic utopian spirit of the nostalgized era – perhaps most clearly expressed in its popular music – in a symbolic critique of today's hardships and combine to make a heavy political momentum. Thus far it seems that Cohen's argument is applicable: generational community is symbolically constructed through music and descriptions of the supposedly shared past, and this "folk history" of the pensioners – just as Cohen argues – seems to be more oriented to the present than to mere retrospection. But if the symbolic community is a working basis for political struggle, what are its constraints? If we view the past as a foreign country we must also grant that countries have borders, topographical and political. Behind the interface of pastness pensioners may find the freedom to hide away the complexities and controversies of today, but this past may also become a prison, locking its prisoners in a constant nostalgic smile vis-a-vis the larger public.

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⁸ In the opening of his novel *The Go-Between*, a story about an elderly man looking back upon his boyhood experiences in late-Victorian England, L.P. Hartley first uttered the often quoted words "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there" (Hartley 1953:9). Hartley's words have since then often been applied to various constructions of distant pasts, but more rarely to the self-experienced past they first described (cf. Lowenthal 1985).

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