

## ***How Bibliographic Classification Mirrors Society - the Case of the Swedish SAB-system***

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### **Abstract**

The article reports on a study of the Swedish Classification system, the SAB-system and its ability to reveal certain social and ideological structures in Swedish society in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Methodology is based on critical hermeneutics and ideological analysis. Results show that the classification system shows significant correspondences between the structure of its disciplinary hierarchies and ideals in the surrounding society.

**Keywords:** *Classification, Public Libraries, Hermeneutics, Ideology, Sweden*

### **Introduction**

Although we have this basic understanding of the complexity in the relation between a classification and its context, it has seldom been thoroughly investigated in order to search for the various mechanisms in the system that reveals certain affiliations to a given ideological discourse. The basic aim of this article is therefore, to investigate the way in which a dominating ideological discourse in society is reflected and transformed in a bibliographic classification system within the realm of a politically defined public library.

The study is divided into two parts; one that focuses on the theoretical and methodological points of departure. The second part, which is the focus of this article, is the actual analysis of the problem presented above. The empirical object of study is the Swedish classification system "Klassifikationssystem för svenska bibliotek" (the SAB-system), in its first edition from 1921.

In order to fulfil the aim of the study a theoretical and methodological framework is construed from several scientific disciplines and traditions. The most central of these are theories on the relation between a text and a given reality or context - theories that are primarily used in literary criticism and aesthetics and that gather around the pivotal concept *mimesis*. Mimetic theory is used in two ways; firstly as a way of conceptualising the representation of ideology in the SAB-system, secondly as a methodological point of departure. This mimetic methodology is based on the writings of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, and primarily on his work *Time and Narrative*. Ricoeur outlines three consecutive steps in the analysis of mimesis. The first step is the delimitation of a relevant context to the text in focus. For this, theories on ideological reproduction and institutional development are used. The second step is to conduct a close reading of the text, in this case the SAB-system, in order to reveal those structures in the text that can be said to work as textual representations of the defined context. This is the most "empirical" part of the study. The third step can be seen as a synthesis of the two former in that the textual representation is discussed as an interaction where the given context influences the content of meaning in the text, at the same time as the text transforms these contextual influences according to the limits of the form and structure of the text itself. According to Ricoeur's reasoning this synthesis is by no means objective in any strict sense but the result of the influence that the reading of the text has had on the interpreter, which gives it a character that is best described by the concept of catharsis. This can help us add new contextual dimensions to the role of context within LIS studies as it has been discussed in the last fifteen years. It also contributes to the development of hermeneutic tools in classification research. Further this study can be seen as an example of a kind of critical, emancipatory research which is all too scarce in contemporary LIS research.

### **Ideological and institutional context of the SAB-system**

The SAB-system is part of a public library context which influences not only the practical use of the system, but also the actual design of it. Public libraries in Sweden were institutionalised during the two first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. A central feature of this institutionalisation is the creation of new and uniform tools such as cataloguing rules and a general classification system. These tools were designed to correspond with the overall aims of unifying the library sector in Sweden. The SAB-system was a part of this process. When regarding public libraries as political

institutions we must examine what norms and values were upheld within the public library discourse that evolved during the decades up to 1921 and that are of interest here. We must also examine how these norms and values fit in with the general ideological development in Sweden during this period.

Public libraries can be seen as autonomous public institutions from 1905, when the state for the first time granted funds for public library activities. However, several types of libraries existed before this period that called themselves "public", most notably parish libraries and popular movement libraries. One of the novelties of the public libraries was that they were independent of any mother organisation that limited library activity or that provided it with a distinct ideological or institutional affiliation. Each of their important predecessors had been dependant on other organisations, such as the state church (parish libraries), the trade unions (workers libraries), and the temperance movement (study circle libraries). In addition to these there were the academic libraries with their natural affiliation to the universities.

Lack of institutional affiliation forced the new public libraries to define its own system of norms and values in relation to other public institutions and to create new professional standards and ambitions. This was done by initiating a discussion about the role of the public library in society in the national library press, a discussion which took place regularly between 1907 and 1921. One of the ways of conquering an ideological identity through this discussion was by using different ideological strategies i.e. ways of shaping the discussion so that the arguments legitimise certain ideological standpoints. The most successful of these strategies strived to neutralise political and social difference and struggle, regarding the public library as an institution above politics and social stratification. This is a strategy that has been adopted from the American public libraries and then combined with certain Swedish elements in making it a mainly conservative strategy. The ideological identity of the public libraries is however, not only conservative. Their institutionalisation within Swedish society must be seen as a part of the democratic breakthrough in that the public libraries have a distinct role in promoting and legitimising democratic values in that they are empathic in permitting different points of views to be represented side by side within the walls of the library and within its stocks. This empathy, which is legitimised through library practice, is one of the factors that make it a genuine democratic institution.

The development of democratic institutions is not something that is primarily connected with conservative ideologies, but at this time rather to liberal, based on a natural human rights view of society as a rational construction that can be formed for the benefit of the majority. The ideological identity of the public library can therefore be described as a cross-over between liberalism and conservatism. The former is exposed in

this new and empathic way of thinking compared to its different predecessors, particularly when compared with the libraries of popular movements which legitimised an explicit oppositional role with regard to the public education structure in society. The latter was revealed in the controlling mentality that the public libraries upheld. This had been very pronounced in parish libraries, governed by the Church of Sweden that came to be the direct institutional base on which the new public library structure in society was built.

Public libraries had within its own embryotic organisation, primarily influenced by the American public library development, had a very distinct ideology even before the possibility to implement it in Swedish society was at hand. The democratic breakthrough in Sweden transformed the country's political and ideological landscape from one that had been totally dominated by rural conservatism to one that became primarily dominated by liberalism and early forms of social democracy. This paved the way not only for several forms of popular education, but also for public libraries as public institutions. Because of this it is possible to place public libraries among those institutions that in a relatively clear way legitimised the norms and values of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic movement in Sweden. The combination of liberal and conservative elements in the discourse that developed within the public libraries and that provided a framework for its ideological identity is the issue that is most interesting to search for in an attentive reading of the SAB-system.

### **The structure of the system - an idealistic fall**

Within LIS research we have a basic understanding that the classification systems used in libraries are related to different ideological standpoints, and through mimetic theory we know that the form of the text influences the way in which this relation is given its textual representation. Therefore it is possible to reveal and define certain norms and values through a systematic study of the structures and language in the classification system. We just have to read it as an autonomous text. When it comes to the SAB-system there is, however, one question which is important to address immediately - that is the reason for creating a Swedish classification system at all. There were after all alternatives at hand, primarily the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) which in the 1910's had been introduced in both Denmark and Norway, the two countries closest to Sweden in library cooperation.

A committee that was appointed by the 1917 General Assembly of the Swedish Library Association (SAB) constructed the SAB-system between 1917 and 1920. In the preface of the system the committee discussed a number of choices that had been made during the work. One of the most

important was whether to make a new system or remodel an already existing one such as the DDC. The decision seems to have been a rather easy one. After a short discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of DDC, the committee decided to create a system that was built on what was described as a "tradition" in Swedish bibliographic classification. This "tradition" consisted mainly of the use of alphabetic notation in the different classifications of the popular libraries, as opposed to DDC's numerical notation. The DDC was also seen as having too much bias towards American conditions in its general divisions, placing many subjects which appear frequently in Swedish libraries too deeply in the hierarchies. This had been a problem in both the Danish and Norwegian implementations of the system, and the classification committee did not want to dabble with those problems once again.

The SAB-system is constructed explicitly for use in public libraries, school libraries and other forms of smaller libraries. Although the academic libraries were not part of the discussion, the SAB-system was still, however, under significant influence by them. This reveals itself in a number of ways. Firstly, in the elected classification committee almost all the members came from academic libraries. Secondly, in the actual hierarchies of the system. Although the Swedish "tradition" of alphabetic notation is applied, the structure of the hierarchies is built on the basis of one of the classification systems in use in Swedish academic libraries, something which made the SAB-system into something of a hybrid, defined as a public library classification, but with the depth of an academic classification.

The overall structure of the SAB-system consists of 22 main divisions. They are ordered in three consecutive groups that can be described, roughly, as a movement from the spirit (religion) to the body (medicine). It can be conceptualised as an "idealistic fall". It is possible to summarise the groups as 1) "Man as a spiritual and intellectual being", 2) "Society as construction and social practice", and 3) "Nature". In each of these groups ideologically interesting patterns can be found both within the group and between them, thus revealing a number of themes and movements within the SAB-system that can be said to define certain ideological tendencies within the text.

The first group, "Man as a spiritual and intellectual being", consists of subjects such as religion, philosophy, education, languages and art. The most striking movement is one that starts out in official organisation and dogmas and moves towards more alternative forms. The movement is manifest in the divisions in that the official standpoints are generally placed at the top of the hierarchies and the alternatives are at the bottom, or even transferred out of the actual system and into the accompanying comments. Examples of this are; the State Church vs. "sects", which are actually non-Lutheran churches such as the Baptists, classic philosophy vs. magic, the

public educational system vs. popular movements in adult education. Another movement that is present in these divisions is one that is related to geographical and cultural distance, where Swedish as a language and cultural context is given a privileged position in relation to others. The movement goes from Sweden to Scandinavia and Europe and then across the world to a completely undivided African continent.

The next group, "Society as construction and social practice", also has centre-periphery movements, both regarding official standpoints on different issues and geographical bias. The group is very heterogeneous and contains such classes as History, Geography, Social Sciences, Technology and Economy. One feature that differentiates this group from the previous is a more explicit contemporaneous way of dividing and relating individual subjects. For example, the technology and economy divisions are vast, but more on a horizontal level than on a vertical, giving them a character of maps, where "the present" is very pronounced. One feature that is revealed in this group is the presence of a silent norm, against which an alternative is made explicit. The most striking example of this is the class General Politics, which is unspecified, except for socialism, anarchism and communism, which are expelled from the class itself and placed in their own. The same goes for the class National Economy. This use of a silent norm is also present in the SAB-system in one other issue, that is not restricted to one single class, but is scattered all over the system, though most frequent in this group of divisions. Throughout the system there is a silent male norm against which the woman is defined in a rather explicit way.

In the third group, "Nature", only three divisions are grouped, Mathematics, Natural Science and Medicine. There are two main features that are of any ideological interest in these divisions. The treatment of man differs very much from the one that we find for instance in the DDC, in that the SAB-system does not relate man to the animal world in any way whatsoever. This might indicate that Darwinism, and thus a scientific view of man, had not yet been internalised in the thinking of those who constructed the system. On the other hand we have in the medical division the other interesting example, the class for hygiene. This is interesting since it has further divisions that are vast in scope, ranging from personal and sexual hygiene to social hygiene and eugenics. The inclusion of eugenics in this class indicates a distinct Darwinist view of man, which in some way contradicts the exclusion of man in the hierarchy for mammals. It can, however, also be given a political meaning in the acceptance of the close connections between the governing classes in Sweden, not least the Royal Court, and the ideological movements on the European continent, primarily, in Germany.

The reading of the SAB-system as an autonomous text reveals a number of features that are of ideological significance, not only in content, but also in form. The most distinct are, firstly, the expressed dichotomy between official institutions and dogmas and their organisational and/or ideological alternatives, secondly, the use of a silent norm to visualise an alternative, and thirdly a geographical bias with the close and known as the epicentre. In order to fit in these features with the mimesis of the SAB-system, however, it is necessary to discuss them in the light of the general ideological development in Swedish society at the time when the SAB-system was conceived.

### **A mirror of society?**

The ideology of public libraries in Sweden at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was said to be a cross-over between liberalism and what can be described as a form of social conservatism. In the analysis of the SAB-system itself there is a number of strategies which are used to create a tension between various expressions of the "official" or socially established norms and their alternatives. When we examine these two analyses together it is possible to discern some connections in terms of strategies for ideological reproduction which makes it possible not only to ascribe an ideological identity to the SAB-system, but furthermore give it a role in the definition of the public library ideology in general. The parts of the system where this is most clearly visible are politics, religion, the relation between the sexes, and finally the discrepancy between nationalism and internationalism. In all these cases there is an often far reaching correspondence between the way that the dominating political power in Sweden during this period works and the way in which they are portrayed in the SAB-system. The picture, however, is not all that simple. In many respects the structural strategies of the system correspond to a more conservative discourse in society as a whole than did the discourse of the public libraries in general. It is primarily the use of silent norms within an overall idealistic framework that are traditionally conservative, giving the impression of some sort of natural order in society that is so obvious that it does not have to be expressed. On the other hand, this strategy in the system brings forward various oppositional standpoints, in a way that may well be interpreted as emancipatory in that it actually makes room for phenomena that otherwise would not have had a chance to come to light.

This double character in the SAB-system's reflection of the ideological discourses of its time is somewhat puzzling since it is not really possible to establish with any absolute certainty whether it is to be read as repressive (conservative) or emancipatory (liberal). It is also difficult, and indeed risky, to make too much of an affiliation to one or the other ideology,

since many of the issues that are treated as ideologically interesting in the structures of the SAB-system are not divided according to traditional political borders, but rather by a more or less defined spirit of the age that transgresses the everyday differences between different political parties.

The difficulty in establishing a direct ideological mimesis between the SAB-system and the political discourses in society give reason for further consideration. The analysis that is carried out in this study is good enough to reveal and establish structural strategies within the structure of a classification system that in many ways can be said to correspond to various strategies for ideological reproduction, which can be seen in the public libraries in general. If it is difficult to describe the mimesis of the SAB-system as ideological in any direct sense it might be possible to describe it as moral, as many of the features discussed in the study reflect the predominant spirit in Sweden during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rather than any pronounced political opinions. This makes way for further research that is based on moral philosophy, seeing bibliographic classification systems as moral rather than political representations. Such analysis would add dimensions to LIS classification research and has only scarcely been addressed by contemporary research.

### Further readings

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