Active Membership in Flux in Swedish Civil Society

– but how far can our understanding of membership and volunteer work be pushed before becoming something else?

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There are numerous ways in which citizens can relate to the rich plethora of ideologies and norms as well as organizational expressions and practices found in civil society. The by far most dominating way for how people and civil society organizations (CSOs) are formally interlinked in Sweden can be understood through the concept of active membership.

This paper draws on two different, but closely related studies, that analyze, from a phenomenological perspective, the perceived meaning of membership and volunteer work respectively (Hvenmark 2008; von Essen 2008). Although these studies are concerned with two basically different phenomena, the great merit of drawing on both of them in the present paper is that some of their empirical results and theoretical conclusions regarding membership and volunteer work respectively form a comprehensive base for how to further discuss and understand active membership.

Active membership typically involves an inseparable combination of citizens’ formal affiliation as members, and volunteer work in the organizations they are affiliated with (Lundström and Wijkström 1997 Olsson et al. 2005; Svedberg et al. forthcoming). This understanding of active membership constitutes one of the more common ways for how Swedish scholars, politicians, and laypersons make sense of civil society and citizens’ participation in society as volunteers (see e.g. Amnå 2007).

However, active membership and its above-described blend of volunteer work and membership are now appearing to be undergoing important changes. For example, recent studies reveal that Swedes nowadays seem to be more interested in volunteering without being affiliated as member with any particular organization (Lundström and Svedberg 2003; Olsson et al. 2005). Another interesting development is the seemingly growing trend among Swedish contemporary CSOs to talk of markets, treat members as customers and turn their membership into a commercial product or a service that can be sold on a market (Hvenmark 2008; Hvenmark forthcoming). These and other similar changes make it pertinent to question the way civil society and its practices are understood.

In order to enhance our understanding of how changes related to membership may affect the nature of volunteer work and vice versa, this paper departs from the idea of active membership and brings to the fore a discussion of the mutual dependence between membership and volunteer work. With respect to this, the main research question pursued in this paper explores the inherent dynamics of active membership? The answer to this question does not exclusively start in organisational arrangements nor does it depart from individual behaviour solely, but in the dynamics found in the interface between the two.

The final discussion addresses ongoing changes in the Swedish civil society and explores how much organisational arrangements can change before membership and volunteer work become something else. Are the ongoing changes for how citizens’ engage in the Swedish civil society a challenge or an opportunity?
Literature


Hvenmark, J. (forthcoming), Members as Democratic Owners and Profitable Customers: on Changing Perceptions of Membership and the Commercialization of CSOs, in Is Civil Society A Panacea for all Seasons?, Baden-Baden: Nomos


