

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Urban Lundberg. *Juvelen I Kronan. Socialdemokraterna Och den Allmänna Pensionen*. Stockholm: Hjalmarson og Högberg, 2003. 370 pp. Kr 300.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-91-89660-34-2.

Reviewed by Klaus Petersen (Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus)

Published on H-Skand (September, 2003)

This book is a publication of the author's Ph.D. thesis, which he recently defended at the University of Stockholm, in the Department of History. Lundberg deals with a very central and controversial theme in welfare state reform: the Swedish pension reform of the mid-1990s. The book central focus is upon the Swedish Social Democratic Party's actions in relation to the reform. It is widely held that The Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension, as it was conceived in the late 1950s, is one of the keys to understanding the Swedish Social Democratic Party's (SAP's) great political success in the following decades.

As the title indicates, The Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension was the jewel upon the Swedish welfare state's crown. It was the result of (and one of the important reasons for) the Swedish SAP's exceptional popularity. Thus, during the beginning of the 1990s, the SAP actively contributed to substantial changes in an important part of its own success. This makes the book's choice of focus an obviously interesting one.

The book is divided into five main sections. First, a short theoretical introduction draws attention to the importance of the Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension as the "jewel in the crown." Subsequently, the reader is thoroughly introduced to the Swedish pension debate of the 1980s, followed by a section that discusses Swedish pension reform. The fourth section contains Lundberg's core thesis, revolving around the chain of events surrounding the origin of the pension reform, and its embedment within the SAP's support base. The book is brought to a conclusion by a chapter summing up the SAP and the new pension system.

On the whole, Urban Lundberg has written an interesting and noteworthy book. The reader will become

wiser with regard to Swedish pension reform content and origin, and at the same time gain a clear insight into the development of the SAP during the period. In several respects, we have here an ambitious book. First, it exposes a background for and the origin of the debate on the pension reform, tracing back to the early 1980s. Thus, the reader is well-equipped to understand later developments in the 1990s. Second, it draws on a wide range of social scientific theory, standing as a historical Ph.D.-thesis of a quality that builds on extensive and interesting source material. Apart from directly accessible material such as newspapers, parliamentary debates etc., primary resources includes internal information from the Swedish Social Democratic Party until 1983, interviews with a number of Social Democrats, and internal material about aspects of the reform process during the 1990s. This material gives the author a greater overview than one would usually see in political science literature, digging deep into the political tactics game of welfare state reform. Chapter Three, which deals with the SAP's reaction to liberal government proposals for pension savings in the early 1980s, is very interesting reading, because the author insightfully describes the party's "blame avoidance" perspective. Lundberg's exposure of the pension reform's embedment within the SAP in the 1990s is interesting reading. By combining his original material with theoretical insight about how political parties handle unpopular reforms, the author succeeds in digging deeper into the strategic considerations of the actors, and hence in documenting a number of the considerations that political scientists so far have merely presumed to have taken place.

To point out a shortcoming of the book, it does not stick to a restricted problem, but concentrates rather on a general study of the SAP and the pension reform. The

book's title "The Jewel in the Crown" strongly suggests that its focus will be upon the central significance of the pension system to the power of the SAP in Swedish politics. This perspective is definitely there, but I believe the book would have profited had the author given this theme a more central role. For example, section three excellently describes the changes of the new pension system in relation to the old Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension from the angle of John Rawls' theory of justice among others. However, the section does not provide a clear answer to the question of the new pension system's significance to the SAP: Has the SAP cut off the branch upon which it so comfortably sat? Several times, the book underlines the point of the power resource theory, that the old Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension was too good for the SAP because it tied the middle class to the Swedish welfare state and hence prevented the growth of a private pension market, as it has been seen in Denmark for example. The new Swedish pension system contains among other things a partly private premium reserve, as demanded by the liberal parties. Could this prove to be the Trojan horse that will in the long run weaken the SAP? Obviously, we cannot make clear predictions of future outcomes. However, had the author taken his point of departure from a more detailed analysis of the old Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension, which promoted the voters' support for the SAP, I believe it would have been possible to provide a more direct answer to the question whether the SAP has cut the branch on which it has been sitting. Some passages (for example p. 282) suggest that by endorsing of the new pension system, the SAP has taken a giant step away from the old Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension, but the issue of consequences is not pursued as much as is implied by the title.

In his analysis of internal SAP dialogues, the author also might have more consequently followed the "jewel in the crown" theme. Lundberg includes theoretical literature on internal relations of Social Democratic Parties in general, which is natural, but at the same time turns the analysis away from the perspective implied. It could have been interesting to know whether there was awareness inside the SAP about the centrality of the old Swedish Labour Market Supplementary Pension to the success of the Party. Is the Party's endorsement of the new pension system due to the SAP not recognizing this fact, or was the assessment rather that the pension system had lost its central importance, as implied on p. 286?

To conclude, the broad perspective of the book is both its strength and its weakness: its strength because one gets wiser by weaving through the many aspects of the SAP and Swedish pension reform; but its weakness because the perspective implied in the title deserves further pursuit.

The Swedish pension reform has attracted great international interest. Hopefully, the author will continue to work with the material, so that both in its totality and detail this research eventually becomes accessible to an English readership of social scientists. It would be worth it.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-skand>

Citation: Klaus Petersen. Review of Lundberg, Urban, *Juvelen I Kronan. Socialdemokraterna Och den AllmÖnnna Pensionen*. H-Skand, H-Net Reviews. September, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8088>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.