



**Cultural Diversity
A Glimpse Over the Current
Debate in Sweden**

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Cultural Diversity A Glimpse Over the Current Debate in Sweden

Summary

A year and a half ago, the Swedish government decided 2006 to be The Year for Cultural Diversity (Agenda för Mångkultur, 2005). The general purpose, according to the directive, is to facilitate the possibilities for all citizens to participate in all aspects of the cultural life by enhancing appropriate arenas for different traditions (Agenda för Mångkultur, 2005). This policy decision was not a surprise to both observers and participants of the diversity debate. There has been a growing interest in the virtues of diversity for business effectiveness and success (mångfald.com), heightened scrutiny of institutional and organizational life by the mass media, and legitimizing debates by political parties which had always had some form of concern for diversity, if not for its own sake, at least for capitalizing on the legitimacy of diversity politics in the expectation of local and parliament elections next September. The proclamation of 2006 as a Year for Cultural diversity thus comes naturally from the broadened debates and organizational programs, each actor trying to get legitimacy by using the concept of cultural diversity to suit the demands of the times. Indeed, cultural diversity has become a priority agenda for any legitimate actor, at least in terms of programs and policies, if not in action. Moreover, the coordinator of the 2006 Cultural Year consistently promised in the mass media that this would be “the starting point”, and not merely a celebratory performance (VK, 28 October 2005; DN 3 January 2006). Already, what are called as the Cultural diversity consultants had worked since 2003 in eight counties as a partial preparation for this year, and to raise the consciousness of relevant actors in the field of culture and cultural institutions, especially those financed by state money. Private cultural associations, however, are invited to participate during the diversity year but they were not invited to co-design the contents of the diversity year.

This paper is concerned with describing the concept of diversity as used by the different actors in this context, and also examines the background that has led to the decision of the Cultural Year. An implicit concern is scrutinizing whether in fact this year would be a starting point for more deeply engaged diversity programs and actions or a symbolic act of window dressing. The concerned actors base the paper on accounting the background to the Diversity debate in Sweden, and the different expected programs and agendas. As such, the paper is based on analysis of documents and agendas, interviews with different actors and two multicultural consultants at the county level. Additionally, the author also participated in a couple of seminars and conferences and video-filmed some of the speeches by different presenters to capture the patterns of the debate/discourse on Cultural diversity. Implicit discussion is whether the current interest on diversity may lead to its institutionalization in the Swedish society organizations (Scott 1995, Hamde, 2002), or it simply is a ‘traveling’ idea to appear occasionally and then occur in fashion-like manner as many management ideas (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). As pointed out in the sub-title this paper brings provides only a mere glimpse at the huge subject and the debate.

Keywords: Actors, cultural diversity, institutionalization, multicultural consultants, multicultural year, Swedish debate

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I. Introduction

The main purpose of the paper is to describe the discourse on cultural diversity among different actors in Sweden for the last few years, that is, to account for the conceptualizations, and not to explain the actual process through which cultural diversity is lived upon or realized. That is, I am mainly interested to account for if there are any emerging patterns from the debates and discourses to constitute a guide for the future, including the understandings and values people put on diversity. I believe that accounting for the discourse on diversity to be a vital part in understanding how it is practiced in reality. So, I am not looking primarily to describe how exactly cultural diversity is being implemented or accounted for in practical life, although this will come eventually in future studies. In order to do so, I have turned to qualitative research methods with actors involved in the creation and dissemination of diversity discourse, rather than diversity practice. The method consists of interviews with key informants and actors involved in the integration policies, research programs of cultural diversity institutions (Multicultural Centrum, Stockholm), participation in a couple of conferences and seminars with diversity as the main topic and interviews with two Cultural Diversity Consultants (CDC). The Swedish government established the Cultural Diversity Consultants since 2003 to work disseminate relevant information and create an arena for networking among diverse actors in eight counties, ad to closely cooperate with cultural institutions and leaders in the cultural realm. In two of the seminars and conferences, the debates and appropriate discussions by researchers on diversity were video-filmed¹.

In the following sections, I will introduce the *main concepts* prevalent in the current debate on diversity in Sweden. I will then turn to some of the work at the *Multicultural Centrum* in promoting the virtues of diversity in different contexts, especially the cultural institutions. Here, I will also shortly describe the role of what have come to be known since 2003 as Diversity consultants - or multicultural consultants² - (*mångkultur konsulenter*), followed by the increasing events in terms of some *seminars and conferences* in which the author has participated³. Finally, I will *conclude* my observations about the cultural year, and its future prospects for raising the discourse on diversity to major institutional levels and local contexts.

II. Diverse Diversity Concepts

As in all subjects of the social sciences, different actors in the debate of diversity use different terms differently and thus it is difficult to find a definite, once for all definition of diversity. Three recurring concepts sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes used by the same or different actors in different contexts are: diversity, cultural diversity, and the multicultural (*mångkultur* or *multikultur*) (Westin 1998).

¹ I thank those speakers who allowed me to video film their speeches, especially Kenneth Ritzén, Mikael Morberg, and participants on the Final Conference on Diversity in Lidingö, Stockholm organized by the Multicultural Centrum and the Ministry of Justice.

² The terms diversity consultants and multicultural consultants are used interchangeably in this paper.

³ It would be interesting to follow up seminars and conferences with the topic of diversity issues from a given period at a particular context. Here it can merely be mentioned that they are on the rise.

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Diversity (*mångfald*). The general term diversity refers to different societal groupings such as gender, age, ethnicity, immigrants, and the handicapped. Sometimes it is referred to as a social diversity, consisting of gender, ethnicity/origin, education background, functions handicap, and sexual orientation (Björvall, 2000). The concept of diversity - whether to be gradually institutionalized (Scott 1995) and gets the appropriate acceptance as a norm, or to just dominate for the time being as a fashion (Abrahamson, 1996, Hamde 2002) - has caught the attention of many actors, institutions, both in the private and public sectors. The differences and similarities among societal categories constitute the background and assumption from which diversity researchers get their point of departure. Depending on whether one emphasizes differences or similarities, actors attribute specific positions and roles to the different categories and form the *content* of diversity and the shape it within the whole society (Czarniawska & Höpfl, 2002)

Cultural diversity (*kulturell mångfald*) and **Ethnic diversity** (*etniskt mångfald*): In the Swedish context, most often than not, cultural diversity is interchangeably used with ethnic diversity, the latter referring to immigrants or their culture. Research on cultural diversity takes place in such diverse institutions as the Multicultural Centre in Stockholm), The Swedish Institute for Working Life, a PhD education program - *Tema Etnicitet* at Linköping University - and *Suntarbetsliv* by the Swedish Federation of Entrepreneurs, and labor market partners which take cultural diversity as a strategic resource, in spite of many reports to the contrary, that is, charge employers to have discriminated applicants on the basis of ones *ethnicity* in recruitment. As a result of the latter charges, anonymous application for recruitment is being discussed among major political parties and labor market bodies in Sweden). Although not the same, the terms cultural diversity and ethnic diversity are most often used interchangeably. While ethnic diversity most often refers to immigrated groups relative to Sweden-born citizens, cultural diversity is more than that. It also includes aspects of cultures within the same national group, such as Swedish and the Sami cultures, to take one example from the indigenous groups, or the journalist culture relative to academic culture. This is also related to the different ethnic groups in Sweden but the term 'ethnic' immediately is equated with immigrant groups.

Diversity at work (*mångfald i arbetslivet*)⁴ is also getting heated interest in both research (Fägerlind & Ekelöv, 2001) as well as organizational context where the goal is to either view diversity as a strategic resource and/or as a tool against structural discriminatory practices (Essemyr, 2000, Mlekov and Widell, 2003). Working life is on the arena in which diversity is believed to find its place and meaning, an where it is heated discussions an debates take place, including discriminatory and unjust measures are highlighted (even in the mass media), discussed, debated, and controversially held to apply is working life. This topic is also getting increasing attention among employers and employee organizations (de los Reyes 2001). Every interest on the topic of diversity takes working life as an exemplary arena for its implementation. Even the integration policy for the time being takes working life as a place in which integrated society experiences its egalitarian values and virtues (Interview, Lars Göran Brandt, 29 November 2005). As Fägerlind & Ekelöv hold:

“A whole industry ahs grown up around diversity with numerous consultants an training

⁴ For a concise summary of the diversity in working life in Sweden, see Fägerlind & Ekelöv, 2001, de los Reyes 2001 and Mlekov and Widell, 2003.

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programs and we are starting to witness a growing interest from the research world in studying the issues on diversity in working life” (2001: 6).

Different industries, institutions and work places are examined within this framework, such as diversity in education (Runfors, 2003), diversity in cultural institutions (Pripp, 2004), diversity in business organizations, etc. etc.

Multiculturalism, the multicultural. According to the Director of the Multicultural Centrum, Leif Magnusson (Interview, 6 December 2005), the term multicultural unfortunately tends to be outmoded because it has been used since the mid 1990s and it connoted different meanings at that time than it does now. He holds that the term will be modified or completely changed in the near future but that both the Centrum and many other institutions deal with it means that it has become the official term used to denote diversity. Thus, multiculturalism or the multicultural denoted combinations of fixed cultural groups that essentially remain un-mixed or having less to do with each other. In the Agenda for Multicultural Year (2005), *multiculturalism* is defined as an ideological and political societal ideal with a demand for equality and justice for all people, regardless of origin, and the right of groups to their own roots (2005: 53).

In this paper, the concept, which became the basis for determining the Year 2006 to be a year for Diversity is *multicultural* (mångkultur) perhaps as a result of the influence from the 1990s when the Multicultural Centrum was established and many programs aimed at creating a multicultural society. Some commentators hold that the failure of multicultural society programs itself triggered the promotion of the idea of diversity, which perhaps is due to its positive connotations, according to de la Torre Reyes (2001). Researchers and practitioners alike use it. Some critics of the term multicultural also note that in other European countries have already abandoned the term multicultural in favor of intercultural, because of the fact that culture is difficult to keep separate in one state or nation (DN 10 2006).

Integration. In this section I am interested to account for the discourse on diversity from the policy of integration point of view. Integration and immigration have been closely related and studied subjects in the Swedish context. One can only note the continuingly interesting activities, programs, conferences, courses related to the well known IMER - studies on International Migration and Ethnic Relations (Westin 1999). In the fall 2005, I have participated in some conferences with the topic of integration. In such events, the discourse used, attitudes expressed, and topics raised by participants in order to illustrate the topic lacked other concepts raised above⁵. In all of them, the general policy statement for formal acknowledgement of integration as the future road to *social cohesion* was stressed, with specific reference to immigrant groups in Sweden. In one of the conferences arranged by the Municipality of Umeå, in cooperation with other municipalities and bodies in the county, integration was taken to be the task for the majority to integrate the minorities, although dissenting voices were not lacking. Moreover, some participants, especially politicians, were satisfied by the rate in which people are shifting from racist and discriminatory attitudes and expressions in the 1950s and 1960s to more appropriate

⁵ I attended as a guest in an important event in Umeå when 25 major public and private institutions, including municipalities in the county of Västerbotten's discussed and signed a Diversity Agreement (RÖK), with the central topic of integration, where no one raised the term multicultural or ethnicity. Integration was assumed to naturally emerge with an immigrant getting work (November 30 2005).

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terms, such as saying blacks instead of neger! The time range for the change was assumed in the discussion to be *generations*. Another commentator (or actor) during agreement argued that the term culture was not part of the integration work, politically, because “we deal mainly with individuals to get work and enjoy the opportunities Sweden provides; when other actors deal with groups, then perhaps culture may be raised as important”.

I have discussed in the above sections to show how complicated the topic of integration, culture, multicultural, and ethnicity have become, where the terms not only invite interest and genuine concern, but also raised issues that tend to be contradictory, hesitancy, paradoxical attitudes, and hesitant practices. Partly the different projects and programs about diversity tend to be separated from each, and starting from different perspectives, methods, and theoretical frameworks. An example in point is the absence of culture in integration policies, and the absence of direct mention of discrimination in some diversity discourses, such as “diversity pays” strategies by companies (De loss Reyes 2001). The field of diversity thus can be argued to have been overloaded by unfitting viewpoints and policies that demand adequate follow-up and research in the future.

III. Preparatory work at the Multicultural Centrum

In this section, only that work meant to get prepared for the Diversity year will be dealt with. In here, two important preparatory programs can be mentioned. One is the establishment of Diversity consultant since 2003. Another is the detailed criterion for promoting diversity by and for cultural institutions in their work for diversity. Both tend or are meant to promoting the virtues of diversity in different contexts, especially the cultural institutions. The Centrum at Fitja, Stockholm became famous for its program and commitment of its researchers since mid 1990s when diversity was catching the attention of communal, governmental, and immigration authorities, not least employers. The idea of the multicultural year as well as the multicultural consultants was originally worked out at the Multicultural Centrum. The position of multicultural consultants was such a novel idea in Sweden to the extent that it caught the attention of the mass media since 2003, and politicians at the county level because that is where they work).

However, one of the consultant interviewed held that the position was simply decided and thrown into the field of diversity without much thought and sufficient resources, and thus it seems to be a hasty decision (Interview with Teshome, 6 December 2005). Any way, when the government established multicultural consultants (or diversity) consultants in 2003, the idea was that they could enhance raising the consciousness of different actors, especially those involved in public cultural institutions such as the music, theater, libraries. An evaluation of the diversity consultants is going on at the Multicultural Centrum (Interview with Nina Edström, 6 December 2005, Stockholm). They work in seven counties, in cooperation with state, regional and local relevant actors stimulate the features and values of a multicultural society (cultural diversity), especially within the cultural institutions. According to Nina Edström (Interview 6 December 2005), their performance have varied from careful observation in their offices to bold penetration into the activities of cultural institutions, and thus it is too early to judge the extent to which the MCCs succeeded.

The second main work of the Multicultural Centrum is to create structures and criteria for cultural

institutions in their work on diversity (Pripp, et al, *Tid för mångfald* 2005, Time for Diversity). This can be defined as methodological support. This section is therefore based mainly on the report Time for Diversity (Pripps, et al, 2005). The Multicultural Centrum devised methods for how institutions and other actors can work better with diversity. These methods can also be described as perspectives on diversity work⁶.

By whom. This method encourages diversity researchers and program leaders in the cultural arena to ask if the work to be done or desired is done by and with the appropriate actors that are the beneficiaries, that is, all actors, including immigrants (Pripps, 2005). The question asked is by whom or who plans, creates, and leads and implements the programs for diversity?

For. To which extend do the activities and programs relate and link to the ethnic and cultural diversity audiences and categories from whom they were designed?

How. *How* are activities and program presented: as minority expressions, as mixed or in a different form?

With. Are activities being implemented in cooperation *with* co-workers and/or references groups, experts or other involved which represent cultural or ethnical diversity?

About. Do the activities and programs deal *about* the perspective and themes which link to ethnic and cultural issues?

Where. Where are the diversity activities and program presented, in the ordinary activities or in project form, in the main office or particular arenas, as particular expressions or part of a greater ordinary context?

In addition to these guidelines, the researchers at the Multicultural Centrum developed diversity issues to be dealt with in the following areas: Diversity in production of cultural services, in the organization itself, as well as in and for the audiences.

IV. Towards a Diversity Year, 2006!

The government motivated its decision for a year for cultural diversity by highlighting the social diversity Sweden finds itself in. The policy directive it describes the situation as follows.

"Sweden has developed into a country that is characterized by cultural, linguistic and religious diversity. It is important to highlight that every publicly financed culture institutions and culture-enhancing organizations take the responsibility in their activities to all of the citizens of the people in the country. The starting point is that all citizens' experiences, knowledge and values should be reflected and taken into account in order to enrich and develop the publicly supported cultural life" (Kultur Kommittédirektiv, Dir.2004.169, translation by the author).

The policy points to an inclusive strategy where people who have no yet get the chance or

⁶ These are described here in order to follow up in future studies and current concerns, not just to copy what others said.

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opportunity to enjoy cultural services created by publicly financed institutions and organizations will be able to do so and thus be part of the wider society. To this end, the government has given two types of orders: mandate and invitation. Those institutions that are given the *mandate* for the MCY 2006 are expected on behalf of the government to reflect diversity issues in their activities, and those aiming to include so far excluded groups. These include 22 Authorities in the field of culture, 10 Foundations and publicly owned companies, and 13 Universities and colleges. Some more embassies are also given this mandate. These institutions are expected to carry out specific activities that highlight cultural diversity and the agenda is already put as to when and where, as well as by whom these will be done. However, the majority of institutions are not given a mandate in the directive but are simply *invited* to participate in the multicultural year 2006. These include all municipalities, counties, county councils, and the Region Skåne, 21 Authorities, 26 universities and colleges, 29 scene arts, regional (29) and other (13) museums, 21 libraries, 23 archives, 17 periodic festivities, and 68 miscellaneous institutions. Interestingly enough almost all of the immigrant cultural associations, such as the RE: Orient, Teshome's Selam Cultural Association, etc, are merely invited, which means that their participation to contribute to the MCY remains at their own will.

Seminars and conference.

Partly as preparation to the Diversity year, and partly as ongoing discussion on diversity, many seminars and conferences are held both in the private and public sector. The information in this section is based on participant observation of four conferences and seminars between September and December 2005. The topics dealt with were directly related to how to tackle with cultural diversity issues and the in case of integration of immigrants, how to introduce, establish and eventually integrate (read assimilate) "into the Swedish majority society! The latter expression has raised heat discussions in one of the seminars held in 16th November in Umeå, organized by SENSUS and led by an organizational consultant. The Seminar topic was formulated as "*Integration, in whose terms*"; contrary to this expressive formulation where the connotation was integration has to be done in cooperation and participation of all involved, both the majority and the minority groups, some of the seminar participants repeatedly used the expression "integrating immigrants into the majority, Swedish culture", which was seen by many participants, immigrants included, as provocative and assimilatory, to say the least. Formulations and discourse in certain programs and strategies were supposed to conceal, and so accentuate, power and domination, rather than uncover and eventually weaken them.

In the conference "Mobilizing for Integration" (*Mobilisering för integration - flaggskepp, fallgropar, förändring*) arranged by the Ministry of Justice and the Multicultural Centrum (7-12-2005), many interesting topics on diversity were discussed both from the private but especially from the public sectors. The language used in this conference was more formal, more academic, mixed with public sector civil servants explaining their projects and program for diversity.

Can the Diversity year make an impact on diversity issues?

As elsewhere, there is no lack of critics to the multicultural year. Some hold that "this only talk and no talk really lead to real action (DN, 3, 10 January 2005). Some participants at an

Integration Conference in Umeå (October 22 2005) emphasized that they have been working on integration and diversity issues for the last few decades but that was only talk, and “mere talk leads nowhere”. This comment was on the background note that Sweden has changed its policies from “immigrant policies’ to “Integration policies”⁷ in late 1990s. But those who worked with these issues note no significant change on action. Critics of the Diversity Year 2006 also point out that some of the criteria developed in and by the researchers at the Multicultural Centrum (who, what, etc, see page 7 above) are already neglected in the design of the year. According to Teshome, who worked as a Diversity consultant in the County of Stockholm since 2003, “no one was interested in our knowledge, the knowledge and skills of private associations or their skilled members in the cultural area, specially those by immigrant groups when the policy makers and the government designed the year 2006 as diversity year” (DN 3 January 2006).

In the same manner, the artist Özz Nüjen also criticized the diversity year as a foolish idea (*ett mångkulturår är en dum idé*). “Have we not reached longer?” He continues, “No one can learn diversity. No one can think of that. It is, instead, by working with people from other cultures that we learn about diversity. When you work with a homogeneous group of white culture artists, it is clear that there will be any diversity out of that” (DN 10 January 2006)

From integration to what?

Integration connotes a multicultural society where many different groups of people mutually coexist and respect each other’s ways of living but the integrating discourse at least for the time being in Sweden is limited to introducing immigrants to the majority working life, and not in any way related to the culture, diversity rhetoric and discourse. Both discourses are isolated from each other while the people denote in both of them perhaps may be the same people. According to a director of integration in one of the counties where a diversity consultant has been working since 2003, there has been no working relationship of interest between the two offices; he also noted that ‘multicultural’ was not the dimension from which politicians work in the integration/diversity field.

Concluding observations

In this paper, the interest was not for accounting all of the concepts and programs used to describe diversity issues in Sweden but just to look at the emerging ideas and discourses from very narrower angle, from the decision to have a multicultural, diversity year, and from some few seminars and conferences on the subject. Implicitly, I discussed recurring reasons for diversity in the Swedish discourse which revolve around three important concepts: diversity for profitability, diversity as a bearing social justice, and finally, diversity for competence. The question is whether all organizations especially now in the cultural field, are interested in just raising profitability or getting legitimacy from the public that puts a notice on them (Meyer and Rowan 1977). I have noted that the projects on multicultural issues tend to be less related to integration issues, and that diversity is taking over multicultural dimensions as it tends to be viewed as a

⁷ Från invandrarpolitik till integrations politik, see Lena Södergren (2000). Svenskt invandrar- och integrations politik, Sociologiska institutionen, Umeå universitet.
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neutral connotation. It was also observed that the different actors in the field of diversity tend to working separately from each other. The issue of power in the discourses is less studied with some few exceptions (Ds 2005: 12). According to an anonymous integration worker, it seems that ‘people are tired’⁸ of ‘diversity issues. First was gender, then nondiscriminatory policies, now multicultural issue, and finally, diversity that embraces all’ (Anonymous interviewee). Yet, few seminar participants already were dissatisfied by the absence of minority groups and their associations from the important events eventually affecting their lives.

Finally, I conclude the paper by raising the question: Is diversity a concept whose time has come, or is it one that just appears to disappear soon - a fad, fashion, a passing construct? This topic constitutes the next step in my study about diversity in Sweden.

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Daily Newspapers

⁸ The question is only to raise ‘who is afraid of, and tired of diversity issues’. This question of people being tired of taken up as an excuse to do nothing, as one seminar participant narrated from her experiences in her workplace. Kiflemariam Hamde: Cultural Diversity: A Glimpse Over the Current debate in Swedish: First EURODIV Conference:

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Lars Göran Brandt, Director of Integration, County of Västerbotten, 29 November, 2005, Umeå.

Nina Edstrom, Multicultural Centrum, Stockholm, 5 December 2005.

Leif Magnusson, Director of Multicultural Centrum, 6 December 2005, Stockholm.

Teshome Wondimu, Multicultural Consultant of Stockholm County, 6 December 2005, Stockholm

Carola Larsson, Länsarbetsnämnden, Committee for Labour Market Committee for the County of Västerbotten, 21 December, Umeå

Conferences and Seminars on Diversity

“*Kultur inte bara tillväxt*”, arranged by the Municipality of Umeå in Cooperation with the County of Västerbotten, (Conference on Culture), October 20-21 2005.

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RÖK Regional Överens Kommelse om Mångfald. Västerbottens län, 30 November 30 2005, Umeå (attended as a guest).

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