



The Home of the Safe and Short-circuited Security Systems

Janna Holmstedt & Lisa Bäckman, 2005.

In my family of four, everything was divided in four equal parts, especially cakes. In this system of equal rights you were granted not to be discriminated because of your sex or age, or because you didn't have the ability to speak up for your rights. The 8-year old girl always got the same amount of cake as the 35-year old man or the 11-year old boy.

You could do as you pleased with your share, eat it at once, save it for a later occasion or even give it away to someone else. This didn't happen very often though, since nobody really was in great need of such a graceful act –a quarter of a cake is quite a mouthful. One could say that this was an ideal and fair system, teaching the members of the family to enjoy, without jealousy, their share or to save it for the future. But you could also say that it had more to do with avoiding conflicts between constantly quarreling siblings than with teaching them fairness and equality.

As kids we kept loyal to the system, we relied on it, it was just –and above all it was efficient. Equal rights meant equal amounts.

I grew up in one of the housing project areas from the 1960's in Göteborg and in the basement of these houses were combined storage spaces and shelters. To include shelters in every new block of apartments that was built was a proof of the planning ability among the politicians: From the small concerns to the big and back again in an all-inclusive security system; the reinforced dwelling. War was paradoxically very present in my childhood because of these shelters but also because of all the bunkers on the islands outside Göteborg. My family spent the summers on a small boat criss-crossing the archipelago where me and my brother used to play around collecting cartridges among jelly fish, cow shit and bunkers. It also happened that un-detonated mines floated ashore or got stuck in the nets of fishermen –the mines where either relics from a black and white past or new ones, leftovers from military exercises. On the milk cartons (milk cartons seemed to be the mass medium par excellence) one could read what to do in case of an emergency or how to make a blueberry milk drink. There was no cold war atomic dread involved. As kids we felt secure and well informed on the whole, even when a guy was said to have blown himself up in his bath tub a few apartments away.

Equal rights was one of the motivating forces in building Folkhemmet and a good and secure life for each of its members its goal. In order to build a fair society we need to foster good citizens and the reward for being a good citizen is individual freedom. We answer to a slightly modified version of the Golden Rule: Do as you please as long as you please others with what you do. This is the burden of collective individualism –constant guilt.

In the ideal home, Folkhemmet, the fellow man and the citizen merge into one. But when the responsibilities and demands of the fellow man become one and the same as those of the citizen there is no limit to what we can claim in the name of justice and safety. In the fairly affluent society the fight for justice, fairness, and welfare seems to have reformulated itself into a demand on behalf of the individual. A social cause and an urgent need have become a psychological cause, and as such it is reckless: Not fair!

When I write this, in December of 2004, the regional social insurance office (Försäkringskassan) informs us through television that it is fraud to call in sick without really being sick; the social security system was never meant to cover heartbreaks and hangovers. In my view the message reads: The citizen has become a spoiled child, passive and egoistic, and the state refuses to be a “curling parent” (a parent who sweeps the ice clear of any obstacles that are in the way of their children, as a Danish psychologist famously put it when talking about modern parenthood.) Grow up, be responsible, be independent, be collective –be a better person! There are no flaws in the system, but flaws in peoples characters.

Maybe we do have attitude problems (we who are brought up during the “Folkhems-era”.) Maybe we are spoiled. And maybe the opposite is true too, that we are hard working, self-sacrificing Lutherans. But the problem might be that we in going from private to political and back again look at social shortcomings (i.e. political issues) as if they were personal failings (i.e. private matters) and vice versa in a never-ending invisible story.

It's tempting to use the story about splitting the family cake as a metaphore. But a metaphore for what? Solidarity? Child rearing? Justice? Democracy? Authoritarianism? Abundance? Avoidance of conflicts?

Are metaphores taken from family life still relevant when discussing Folkhemmet or are they only worn out clichées? Do these metaphores reveal or hide important issues? When seeing Folkhemmet as a family (a traditional Swedish nuclear family as that) either for the purpose of criticizing it or promoting it, aren't we relieved of the burden of formulating what is actually happening? Instead we “get the picture” because it's familiar and not entirely wrong.

I knew a guy who blew himself up in a bath tub. He gave me a teddy bear but, I didn't like it very much. He was rather strange. I was told, or maybe it was just in my fantasies, that he died because people weren't nice to him. I knew I hadn't been nice enough –and I didn't thank him enough for the teddy bear.

I remember one evening, I guess I was eleven years old, sitting with my parents and their friends in our nice home with Blå tåget on the stereo and Lenin's collected writings on the bookshelf. Earlier that week I had shown a behaviour which my parents' friends considered to be an act of true solidarity:

-Well Lisa, there's certainly a little communist in you!

I had obviously shown a high potential for being a citizen in their future society by giving all my candy away to my cousins. Why? I didn't really need mine.

Me too, I was a believer, me too, I believed in justice and equality, but I had already learnt what could happen if you didn't do enough for your fellow man. I wonder if my parents' friends missed the point. What they saw wasn't communism –it was Luther. It's not good enough only to be a good citizen, you have to be a good human too.

I desperately wanted to do the right thing. I wanted to be the Fellow Man and with goodness as law I was colonizing the world. I wanted to make a safety map. With this map in hand there would no longer be any danger of falling into holes of despair.

You will be safe, you will be secure. I am the super colonizer and I present to you, the home of the safe.

Well, it didn't work out very well being the good human, so here I am with a feeling of constant guilt –like a burnt-out social worker who never seems to be able to do enough. There's never enough. Anxiety about those who are suffering and anxiety about that I'm not the one being there to help. I carry my responsibility as a yoke on my shoulders while others, to my amazement, don't seem to care. I mean, we are all pretty privileged in this part of the world, where's the gratitude?

I have become a disillusioned saviour, tired of all those selfconceited beings who don't seem to think they have any responsibility for other people. Actually, I can't be bothered to save the world any more. There's a limit to what you can do. Instead I have come to realize it's more important to be happy. It's better for me and it's better for you if I nourish my happiness –otherwise I can't do my best for society.

Is this the burden of individual collectivism: You have to feel good to be able to do good? After all, individual happiness is what the welfare state is striving for, isn't it?

In therapy, you sometimes talk about security systems and safety behaviours. Each time you act out this behaviour you will confirm the need for security. Lock the door eight times? Always writing a list of what to do? Call up your drinking mate every day? But writing lists all day long makes it rather hard to find the time to do what's on the list. This could be called a short circuit in the security system. But in therapy, with the help of an institutional fellow being, you can come to realize that this is false security. In order to get a better and more flexible life you have to stop responding to these strict rules –you have to root this bad behaviour out.

Have we discovered and concluded that Folkhemmet is used as a false security system, creating counter-productive safety behaviours? And are we singing along with Schröder and Blair, in that we “must accommodate the growing demands for flexibility” in the name of a more functional and thus better Folkhem? But in what way? When do we need to strictly follow rigorous procedures and when do we need to leave them behind? Who is the judge of that, in what situation and in the name of what: Saving time, saving lives, saving money?

Personal responsibility seems to be the answer to the questions that the demand for greater flexibility poses. Hasn't this got to be a very moderate and paradoxical kind of responsibility? For your own safety (otherwise you will be dead tired and not happy), you need to be flexible enough to adjust to the new demands and rules that will follow. Be prepared to respond to the rules, rather than to consider them or whom they might concern, as if they were truly your responsibility. The rules are there to be followed (trust me) not to be believed in. It's not personal, it's work. It's no body's and every body's responsibility– in a very flexible way! Does this make you confused?

In the borderland between political and private you can visit a helpful fellow being who can treat your private burn-out and help you sort out your priorities. And very neatly we hide the dilemma of when acceptance or revolution is needed. Being sick makes the opposition and conflict disappear. It's neither inside nor outside.