What's the “problem” represented to be in the Swedish state support to fiction?

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Abstract: Through the allocation of funding Swedish literature policy aims to guarantee quality and diversity by supporting broad and versatile book publishing. By using the WPR-approach, a methodology based on critical discourse analysis created by Carol Bacchi, it is possible to explore ways in which the “problems” that underlie the construction and legitimization of state support to new, Swedish fiction are represented. The analysis reveals that quality and “good books” are key concepts in the literature policy, always used but seldom defined. Fiction is treated as something that everyone should read, but there is a qualitative difference between “good” fiction and “trivial” fiction. Quality is considered to be a neutral concept even though it contains normative/traditional views, for example, on gender. Support is appreciated by both politicians and publishing companies and it is seen as apolitical even though it comes from the state and is based on the notion of quality.

Keywords: State support to fiction, Quality, Critical policy analysis, Gender, Values, Swedish literature policy

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Introduction

Through the allocation of funding Swedish literature policy aims to guarantee quality and diversity by supporting a broad and versatile book publishing (Statens Kulturråd, 2010). Quality and “good books” are key concepts in the policy, always used but seldom defined. The policy purports to be neutral, and is often seen as neutral or even apolitical by both left and right wing politicians, as well as by other actors in the cultural field. There are, however, norms embedded within the concepts of “good books” and quality including those pertaining to gender, class and ethnicity. My aim is to make visible norms and presuppositions that affect the Swedish literature policy. Why is the support constructed the way it is, what is quality, and who gets to define the term? What views on the value(s) of literature becomes visible in and around the policy? I will try to answer these questions by analyzing and problematising the state support to new, Swedish fiction. The methodology used is the “what’s the ‘problem’ represented to be?” (WPR)-approach constructed by Carol Bacchi (2009). The construction of the policy will be made visible by using six questions proposed by Bacchi that probe the ‘problem’ in a policy that the policy aims to resolve. The purpose of the methodology is to detect underlying presuppositions or assumptions in the representation of the ‘problem’, how the representation has come about and the effects of particular representations. Silences and other ways of thinking about the ‘problem(s)’ are also taken into account (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2). Bacchi argues that these (often implicit) ‘problems’ are constructed by policy makers themselves; therefore it is important to study the problematisations of a certain policy (Ibid.).

The cultural policy of Sweden has been used to promote art of great quality (so called “high” culture in contrast to popular culture) to the people in order to enrich them (Frenander, 2005, p. 202). But the categorization of cultural expressions in the dichotomy high/popular culture is also often gendered in male/female and other dichotomies like public/private and professional/amateur (Hemmungs Wirtén, 1999, p. 66f). Literature policy is concerned with issues like regulations of the book market, promoting reading for children, youth, adults and more specified segments of the populations (for example immigrants) and support to certain kinds of literature. The dichotomy of high and popular is especially noteworthy when regarding literature, the aim of Swedish literature policy is to guarantee citizens quality and diversity as opposed to the “adverse effects” of commercialization (Frenander, 2005, p. 160).

The relation between art/culture and gender in a cultural policy context is relatively unexplored. The field of culture is often described as innovative and norm breaking, but this is disproved through studying statistics of gender balance in the different areas of culture, which show that the field of culture is in fact very gender segregated¹. Could it be that instead of questioning norms art and culture reinforce the gender stereotypes of the western world? (Stavrum 2007) The purpose of including the dimension of gender in a study isn’t quantitative– to count the gender balance in different cultural fields– it is rather a qualitative approach to study the power structure that makes gender a crucial issue in understanding what kind of art that is deemed to have a greater quality than other kinds of art. As Wendy Brown says: “while gender identities may be diverse, fluid, and ultimately impossible to generalize, particular modes of gender power may be named and traced with some precision at a relatively general level” (Brown, 1995, p. 166). Consequently, when politicians ignore the relations between gender and art/culture cultural policy may be perceived as gender neutral, even though it reproduces a normative imagery of male and female.

The state support to fiction

The state funding of literature has existed since 1975, and is a quality-based retrospective support that was established by the government to guarantee a broad and versatile book publishing. The system of funding new Swedish fiction is arranged so that the publishing companies submit their books to the

¹ It should be noted that the gender balance in a work place doesn’t stop from reproducing normative/traditional and even discriminating views on gender.
Swedish Arts Council (In Swedish: Statens Kulturråd, henceforth the Arts Council). The books are then reviewed by a work group\(^2\) that decides whether or not to appoint funding. The work group has only one single criterion for awarding support\(^1\): quality. If a book is deemed to be of good quality, it will receive state funding and is also distributed to all the Swedish public libraries. The design of the support hasn’t changed, even though it’s been evaluated several times. This, until last year’s government bill on culture, wherein it was decided that a new criterion should be added to quality: the individual project’s need for financial support (Prop. 2009/10:3, p. 60). I will get back to and elaborate on this in chapter Q6.

As a study object, the state support to fiction offers a great variety of relevant approaches: Firstly, it is an aid-scheme that the majority of the concerned actors in the field are satisfied with, and it is important to study public policy that is considered successful, as well as failing policies. Secondly, the support is entirely based on the undefined and abstract concept of quality, which results in the very concrete: money to the publishing companies. From a discursive perspective, it is possible to say that quality is a node that the literature policy discourse revolves around, but it is never defined. Instead the concept is limited by actors stating what is not quality. Thirdly, the assessment itself is not carried out by the state or the government, but according to the principle of arm’s length distance, by a work group consisting of, for the purpose, appointed experts, opening a discussion on the experts’ role in politics. And fourthly: it is possible to discern a moral dimension of the state support to fiction in statements concerning the “good book” that is morally good for the citizen, and for that reason important to acquire. In this paper I will address some of these topics briefly. But first a presentation of the methodology used.

**What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be?**

Australian Professor Carol Bacchi announces two key premises for the WPR approach: (1.) we are governed through problematisations, and (2.) this is what the researcher needs to study instead of problems (Bacchi, 2009, p.25). This is a reaction to the view that a policy is invented to solve a problem, and that the policy analysis in turn is performed by studying these problems, thus is the aim of the WPR approach to study problematisations, and how something is represented as a problem (Ibid, p. xiiif). Within policies that seem to be innocent and straight forward, for example, may problem representations that reveal power structures be lodged. As Bacchi writes, a policy proposal that is put forward may reflect subconscious cultural assumptions, something that will be thoroughly examined in relation to this paper’s study object: the state support to fiction (Ibid, p. x). Bacchi poses six questions (Q1-Q6) as a frame work to a policy analysis; the construction of the policy will be made visible by taking a departure point from the questions which are as followed:

1. What’s the ‘problem’ /…/ represented to be in a specific policy?
2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?
3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?
6. How/where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? (Bacchi, 2009, p. 2.)

Drawing heavily on the works of Michel Foucault, the methodology is based on different aspects of critical discourse analysis, which makes it possible to question ‘truths’ and to make norms and values in cultural policy visible. The WPR approach isn’t a new ground breaking methodology, it is rather a structured way of conducting critical policy analysis that hopefully will concretize, but never simplify,

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\(^2\) The work group consists of authors, librarians, critics, and scholars. The members of the work group are replaced every two years.

\(^3\) This only applies to the support to new, Swedish fiction; the other categories for support (for example children’s fiction and nonfiction) have different criteria.
an analysis. Even though it is the policy that’s in focus in a policy analysis, Bacchi says that an analysis shouldn’t be limited to the government. She also mentions professionals and social scientists as actors that should be accounted for in an analysis, and the state is never the only player, there is a continuous correspondence between the political and the civil sphere (as well as the market. I would like to add) (Bacchi, p. xx & 26). In my case, this is of high relevance; both the cultural field and scholars are occupied with discussing cultural policy, even though they don’t always call it cultural policy themselves. How cultural policy is defined is of course a crucial issue in cultural policy research, sometimes the definition is very narrow and limited to what the Ministry of culture does. But researchers argue that the Ministry of culture isn’t the only instance that creates cultural policy, rather different ministries and actors can make cultural policy even though it is not explicit. For instance a lot of government’s policies that are not considered to be cultural policy, such as immigrant policy and education policy affect the cultural sphere (Harding 2009). Jeremy Ahearne introduces the terms implicit and explicit cultural policy to make visible the difference (Ahearne 2009). I agree with the standpoint that cultural policy research should not focus only on what the ministry of culture does, but instead view cultural policy as something that is created on many different levels and in many different ways every day. This relation between the cultural policy researcher and the politicians should always be made aware. The Swedish cultural policy research tradition has evolved in close relation to the policy makers and there may be a risk that the researchers legitimise the cultural policy without reflection. Professor Eva Hemmungs Wirtén calls for increased self-reflexivity (among other things) to avoid this from happening (Hemmungs Wirtén, 1999, p. 71). Reflexivity is a ground pillar in the WPR approach, Bacchi writes that the researcher must accept that s/he is a part of the problem representations that s/he aims to analyse (Bacchi, 2009, p. 19). It is not possible to exist outside a discourse.

The state support to fiction isn’t a policy per se, but I see no hindrance to apply the WPR approach to a system of support. The texts that I will use for my analysis is the Government Commission Report (in Swedish: Statens offentliga utredningar, henceforth abbreviated to SOU) from 1972, which investigates the state of the Swedish book industry, and a SOU from 1974 which describes how and why a support system could be created, the SOU on literature and books from 1997, the SOU on Culture from 2009 and the following Government Bill also from 2009. I will in addition use an internal environmental scanning on the state support to fiction made by Kerstin Aronsson in 2002 on behalf of the Arts Council and an internal report on the state support made by Björn Linell in 2003 and a small selection of articles from news papers and journals concerning the state support in particular. It is fully possible to extend the amount of practical texts; I’ve made a strict selection due to space. For example not much is known about the members of the work group’s opinions on the support system. Björn Linell mentions in his internal report that he chose to not study the work group due to lack of time and I haven’t found any remarks on the work group in the other texts (Linnell, 2002).

I will follow the six questions in a structured manner in this paper to visualize how I interpret the different parts of the method, but there will of course be an overlap between the segments due to the interrelated nature of the questions. I will put an emphasis on contextualizing the state support and the practical texts used by using contemporary cultural policy research. Context is in itself a matter of interpretation, and I’m not suggesting that I’m giving an objective picture of all that’s been written on the development of Swedish literature policy, but I’m trying to be self reflexive. The paper is explorative; I will try the methodology out to see if it is useful for studying literature policy, perhaps in a different way than it has been studied before.

I look at the WPR approach as a possible way to unveil the political in a scheme that aims to be, and is considered to be, apolitical. The study aims to reveal structures and patterns in cultural policy by studying a part of it, the results can hopefully be applicable to other aspects of cultural policy, especially concerning quality-based state support.
Q1. What’s the ‘problem’ represented to be in a specific policy?

In the SOU from 1974 the commission describes the book market as being in a crisis, the books are too expensive and the publishing companies cannot offer a qualitative publishing due to demands for profit (SOU 1974:5, p. 28). Also the debut releases of works of fiction were decreasing in the 70s, both regarding prose and poetry (Ibid. p. 103). The reading of fiction is described as essential to the reader and it is noted that more and more people are reading ‘poor’ fiction instead of ‘qualified’ fiction (Ibid. p. 86). This leads to a book market that is increasingly homogeneous and doesn’t fulfill the goals for cultural policy. The state support to fiction is introduced to reverse this development. It is interesting to note that the problem isn’t considered to be first and foremost for the readers who don’t get access to fiction of quality but to the book market which isn’t versatile enough, an important difference. Another part of the problem representation is that good fiction as well as poor fiction exists, and there is a fear that the poor fiction are overrepresented both in what the readers choose to read and what the publishing companies are publishing. What the state support to fiction is trying to “fix” is rather the latter than the first. There are other actions taken to promote reading in the 70s both in general and towards different groups. There is a wish from the state to encourage reading of good fiction, but there’s also a fear of improper control of the citizen’s reading habits. The commission discusses a variety of different ways to support literature, but they decide on a general support to quality fiction. Another alternative was to abolish the VAT on books (which was lowered from 25% to 6% in 2002) but that was not seriously considered by the commission in 1974 due to the fact that such an action would gain the mass market literature as well (Steiner, 2006, p. 59). The commercial fiction is viewed as an obstacle for the readers to obtain fiction of great quality.

So the ‘problem’ is represented to be a book market in crisis where literature of quality is declining in favor of mass market literature. It is very interesting to note how these different types of literature is described, I will elaborate on that in Q2.

Q2. What presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the ‘problem’?

There is a great variety of themes underlying this problem representation and I’m going to start with describing the most obvious presuppositions and assumptions and then try to travel outwards. The SOU from 1972 uses the theory on the “erudite loop” and the “popular loop” to explain the distribution of books developed by the French scholar in sociology of literature, Robert Escarpit (SOU 1972:80 p. 276). This theory is never questioned, and as Tobias Harding notes that “mass market” books was defined as such by looking at the way these books were produced and sold, not mainly by studying the content. The kind of literature that should be supported doesn’t get defined either. A keyword in the original directive is the undefined concept of “good books” and it was ultimately Swedish literary scholars who had the task of trying to discern which books that were good (Harding, 2007, p. 141). Another presupposition made in the commission on literature from 1972, which was challenged by contemporary scholars but still gained hegemony, was the belief that quality fiction declined in favor of popular fiction. Even though this was later somewhat disputed the dichotomy between quality literature and popular literature was established (Steiner, 2006, p. 59). This is still a recurrent theme in the debates on literature policy. So, these are assumptions made by contemporary research that is visible in the practical texts from the 70s, but we can open the scope even wider and find a bourgeois view on art. This means a narrow, cultural conservative definition where the “high arts” are considered to be the main concern for cultural policy. In Swedish cultural policy, the bourgeois definition of high art has always been hegemonic, both ideological and practical, despite attempts from the working class to widen the definition (Frenander, 2005, p. 202).

A deep-seated presupposition is that art is an autonomous field separated from the fields of knowledge and moral. Fiction is described in the SOU from 1974 to have a value of its own, an “aesthetic joy in both form and experience” (SOU 1974:5, p. 83). In Critique of judgment (1790) Immanuel Kant describes the autonomy of aesthetics as something that have its own legitimacy, “purposiveness without a purpose”, separated from the legitimacies of knowledge and moral. This view on aesthetics has since dominated the view of art in the Western world (Wallenstein, 2003 p. 12).
What kind of culture the government should support has always been a difficult balancing act for politicians. It is possible to discern a fear of improper management regarding what kind of culture that the Swedish citizens should consume (Karlsson, 2010, p. 62). In the state support to fiction the question of autonomy is solved by letting the Arts council distribute the funds. They have in turn delegated the task of passing judgment on the physical books to the work group. All to make sure that no improper management by the state is being conducted.

At this point in the analysis Bacchi recommends to identify binaries and key concepts within the policy (Bacchi, p. 7ff). Quality is definitely a major key concept in the problem representation of the state support to fiction. Quality is often mentioned but just like the concept of good literature it is never clearly defined. It is sufficient to say that the word is described as something very positive and desirable. It is also a frequently used word in newspapers and journals; even though it is never defined, it is always possible to identify what quality is not defined as. The arm’s length distance is used as a way to make sure that quality is the only criterion for support, the work group of experts that is appointed by the government is also managing the concept of quality whether they are aware of it or not. But of course, the government implicitly says that some books are of a greater quality than other books so they still pass judgment. The work group can be seen as gate-keepers for the concept of quality, because they are the ones that get to (re-)define it.

Good books/ high culture are put against mass market literature and poor fiction/popular culture. Not all books are good books in this discourse, some fiction is greater than other fiction but it is never clearly defined how to tell the difference, it is presupposed that one just know. A clue to what kind of book (‘good’ or ‘poor’) the 70’s reader is holding in his/her hand would be to consider where it is sold. Mass market literature that is sold in kiosks is at this time never considered to be of quality. Popular culture is not only related to commercial interests but also to pleasure and Hemmungs Wirtén connects the binaries of high/popular to other binaries or dichotomies like men/women, work/leisure, public/private and amateur/professional (Hemmungs Wirtén, 1999, p. 66f). Connected to the binary of high fiction/ popular fiction are words that are used synonymous with different kinds of fiction. It is especially noteworthy in the texts from the 1970s where high fiction is described as “qualitative”, “good books”, “qualified” and “serious” while popular fiction is described as “mass market”, “commercial” and “trivial”. Thus there is a very distinct score where the kind of fiction that is connected to a certain kind of production and retail is considered trivial and unserious. The publishing companies that focus on publishing books of quality are described as serious and even as fulfilling a duty higher than just publishing books, they are providers of quality (See for example SOU 194:5 p. 86 and SOU 1972:80 p, 251).

Claes Lennartsson notes in a comparative study of the state support to fiction in Norway and Sweden that there is a visible power dimension in the Swedish system. He says that “it is possible to discern that the ideology of Swedish literature policy can be seen as a power tool for a privileged group of people whose social position among other things presupposes a reproduction of the culture of adult education” (in Swedish: bildning ) (Lennartsson, 1999, p. 155, my translation). Adult education promotes the reading of high fiction. Popular fiction has since Gustave Flaubert’s Madame Bovary (1857) always been connected to female reading. That high culture is related to masculinity and popular culture to femininity isn’t farfetched. Feminist studies on thinkers like Immanuel Kant and Edmund Burke shows that inside the notion of good art exists a normative/traditional view on male and female (Fjelkestam, 2008, p. 79).

This shows that there is a presupposition of aesthetic as a field with a judgment of its own separated from the fields of knowledge and moral. Another visible presupposition is that there are some works

4The Swedish word bildning, derived from the German word bildung is hard to translate. It means adult education, but that’s not the only meaning of the word. It is not an instrumental type of learning but rather a lifelong kind of learning.
of arts that are of higher quality than other kinds, this is also visible in the binary of high/popular. An assumption is that quality fiction is declining on behalf of trivial fiction. Key concepts are quality and “good books”.

Q3. How has this representation of the ‘problem’ come about?
A development that is visible in the problem representation, and may seem contrasting to the assumption of the autonomy of art is the assumption on the instrumentality of art. This is evident in the SOU from 1974 where it is stated that fiction played an important part regarding both spiritual and political “conversion processes” (p. 83). Also in the SOU from 1997 when it is pointed out that the book mediates the (Swedish) language and that fiction is an important tool to understand the past and the present, and may even help readers to participate in the democratic process. The (positive) impact reading has on children and youth is explicitly pronounced (SOU 1997:141 p. 24f). The state support should be seen in this light as something that aims to help people get access to fiction of great quality. The publishing of books of quality in the 1970s is not satisfying according to the government, and more people should read more fiction of high quality. As I previously stated the support isn’t primarily directed towards the readers, but rather towards the book market. At the same time a lot of actions promoting reading were launched, one example is the publishing company En bok för alla (“A book for all”) which publish books of quality for the mass market to a low price. There is a distinct moral dimension in the discussion in respect of the view on literature regarding En bok för alla, it is articulated that citizens should read good books in order to become good citizens (Lindsköld 2008, p. 48). This correlates to the notion made by Hemmungs Wirtén when she compares Swedish cultural policy to French and notes that the latter is more explicitly elitist than the former, which strives to “better potentially everyone by exposing them to ‘good’ culture” (Hemmungs Wirtén, p. 66). But as we’ve seen in Q2 it is still the same culture that is being endorsed, i.e. the “high” culture.

An interesting part of the problem representation that may be undergoing a change is the skepticism towards commercialization. One of the goals of the Swedish cultural policy from 1974 was to counter the adverse effects of commercialization. This goal was removed in the new goals for cultural policy proposed in the SOU from 2009. There it is stated that the relation between culture and the market is perceived in other (implicitly: more positive) ways than a fear for the adverse effects of commercialization (SOU 2009:16, p. 47). The goal has been one of the most debated and symbolic issues of the cultural policy debate since the 1970s. There is of course a visible ideological difference here, the parties on the left are much more skeptical towards commercialization than the conservative and liberal parties (Lindsköld, 2008, p.48). The latest SOU on culture was appointed by a conservative government for the first time and it was expected that they suggested removal of that particular goal. In the 1970s popular fiction was clearly articulated as a threat against the reading of good books. The “threat” towards good books is reformulated in the 90s were there were alarming reports about reading decreasing among children and young adults. In the government commission report on books it was clearly stated that the reading of good literature (in Swedish) and the Swedish language needed protection (Harding, 2007, p. 275). The threat to the reading of books is represented by newer media like TV and computer gaming (Ibid. p. 277). The scope has changed, but there is still a dichotomy between good art and “bad” entertainment.

Another factor underpinning the problem representation is the view on the book market as something that should be controlled. During the end of the 1960s in Sweden there were still a fixed price on books and books were sold through a complex system of “A”-bookstores and “B”-bookstores. This was a big apparatus but the booksellers and publishing companies were hesitant to change (Steiner, 2006, p. 43f). The system did change in the 1970s but there was still a view on the book market as something that shouldn’t be as free as other areas of commercial retail, there is something more to the selling of books. This could be due to the value system in literature; some books are more valuable to read than others. As Ann Steiner notes in her explanation of the Swedish book market from 1970-1980 the book market at this time is seen as going through a crisis, but she continues by saying that you cannot say that the development of the book market was negative if you don’t also acknowledge that some fiction is better than other fiction (Steiner, p. 41). That view point is articulated by several actors
in the cultural policy discourse, regardless of what political stand point they have. There is a consensus in the debates regarding fiction of great quality: it is important to read good books, actors then differ in their views on what the government should do to promote reading. As I’ve described earlier art of quality is considered to be autonomous but this doesn’t mean that art isn’t questioned by both citizens and politicians, especially when they are concerned with difficult themes like war, mental illness or drugs.5

The representation of the problem has come about by an instrumental view on fiction as something that helps to educate the people in both spiritual and societal ways. But at the same time there is art of lesser quality that undermines the positive impact of fiction, and that has to be regulated.

**Q4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the ‘problem’ be thought about differently?**

The state support to fiction is seen as something that distributes grants using the criterion of quality which is viewed as judged by its own rules. The concept of quality is seen as neutral and objective, but what if quality in itself isn’t objective? What if quality actually contains very specific conservative views on men and women for example? Researcher Vanja Hermele explores views of art and gender in a series of studies on different fields in the cultural sphere. In a SOU about gender and the performing arts she writes that she sees a clear connection between culture and science and the key concepts of quality and knowledge, it is all about distribution of power. Men are represented at the top positions in both culture and science regarding whose work is higher valued and who receives the better payment. She means that the concept of quality is a victim of circular reasoning: quality is the work of a few and the work of a few is quality. She goes on to write that the concept of quality almost always is positioned against notions of equality and diversity (Hermele, 2006, p. 44ff). This is also noted by Professor Rita Felski who describes a flaw in attacks on feminist literary criticism: “This is the belief that you cannot do two things at once. You can either look at literature as literature or you look at it as politic, the argument goes, but you cannot do both” (Felski, 2003, p. 6). She argues against this opinion and instead notes that all literature concerns gender: “Our sense of what it means to be male or female is deeply anchored in our thoughts, perceptions, and emotions /…/” (Ibid. p. 11).

There is a view of art (including fiction of course) as something that transcends social conditions and that is universal. Feminist researchers have pointed out that all the universal work of art seems to be made by and about men and issues raised by and about women are seen as particular and not universal (Felski, 2003, p. 14f). If the state support to fiction is based on an assumption that is reserved for men only, then it could at the least be interesting to discuss explicitly. A suggestion to how to think differently about fiction that is deemed to be of quality is given by Kristina Aronsson in an environmental scanning for the Arts Council regarding how the state support could be developed. She interviews actors in the field and concludes that genre determination within the state support to fiction is very narrow and that some kinds of fiction can be overlooked. The only genre she mentions explicitly is working class fiction (Aronsson, 2002, p. 20). This would suggest that there is a way to articulate deficiencies in the concept of quality regarding class. The same would probably go for gender and ethnicity, but that isn’t articulated, maybe because working class fiction is an established genre.

Norwegian researcher Heidi Stavrum says that there are limitations to what one can say within the discourse on gender and culture. It is all right to say that there is inequality regarding jobs in the cultural sphere but it is harder to ask why and what should be done about it. Affirmative action in the cultural sphere is always met with strong protests both from women and men, and there is a consensus that art should not be steered. Stavrum means that presuppositions concerning quality and autonomous art are obscuring the argument that social structures are the same both in the field of culture and other fields of work in society (Stavrum, 2007, p. 11f). This boils down to the privileged place where culture

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has been positioned for the last hundred years. If the idea of quality and the great arts was originally constructed as male, is it even possible for female artists to make art of great quality? (Fjelkestam, 2008, p. 83f)

Left unproblematic is the view that quality is an objective and apolitical concept. A way to think different about the representation is to study how the concept of quality deals with power structures and dimensions of power like class, ethnicity and gender.

Q5. What effects are produced by this representation of the ‘problem’?

Bacchi presents different kinds of effects to be taken into account for this exercise: discursive effects are effects on what can and cannot be said and thought (Bacchi, 2009, p. 15). I’ve already mentioned some on the discursive effects in Q4 concerning the gate-keeping qualities of the concept of quality. It is impossible to have credibility as a cultural politician or other actor if one would suggest affirmative action for the cultural sphere since the autonomy of culture is seen as superior to other views of art.

Subjectification effects are the ways subjects are constituted in a discourse (Ibid.). The work group obviously has a great power in this discourse. The publishing companies appreciate the state support according to Aronsson; they are especially satisfied that it is only one criterion to get support: quality. In Aronsson’s text she notes that the publisher means that the general form of the state support gives it strong legitimacy (Aronsson, 2002, p. 2). They mean that the state or cannot control the publishing companies when no financial judgment is being made. The fact that the system is supported by politicians from both the left and the right wing gives an indication that this is considered a fairly apolitical question, in the sense that a vast majority believe that a government subsidized book publishing is desirable. Put in the line of Chantal Mouffe (2008) the question about state support to fiction, and maybe cultural policy as well, isn’t possible to talk about in the sense of left or right but rather right or wrong. There is a visible moral dimension in how the state support to fiction is described: It is important to read good books (especially for children) to learn good values to function in a democratic society (SOU 1997:141). Sigrid Røyseng found a strong moral dimension in Norway in how the state support to the performing arts is described. The performing arts are described as morally good and therefore the state support to the performing arts is also viewed as a moral obligation, and political issues are transformed into moral issues. That makes it almost impossible to argue for a different stand point in this discourse because the risk of being presented as “evil” (Røyseng, 2007, p. 236).

This shows that the quality criterion gives the state support a strong legitimacy, and an effect of the seemingly objective concept of quality can make it an issue of moral instead of politics.

Q6. How/ where has this representation of the ‘problem’ been produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

The representation of the ‘problem’ of state support is unchallenged, it has been (re)produced over and over in debates from the 1970s to this day. David Karlsson, a free lance cultural journalist and earlier member of the government commission report for culture in 2009 (although he left his mission without going full-term), describes the support as one of the Swedish cultural policy’s “most successful construction” because it works through the market, not against it (Karlsson, 2010, p. 133). A similar conclusion is made by Björn Linell in his report. A clear majority of the stakeholders are satisfied with the system and do not want to change it at all (Linnell, 2002). Therefore it is very interesting that the disruption of this representation comes from a perhaps unexpected direction. In the latest government bill on culture it was suggested, based on the Government commission report, that the state support should take in account, except quality, the individual project’s (i.e. the book’s) need for financial support (Prop. 2009/10:3, p. 60).

But the government bill ignored another proposition for change from the commission report, namely that the state support to fiction should evaluate a “cultural policy priority”. This was to give the state
support a more visible cultural policy profile (SOU 2009:16, p. 303). There is great ambiguity on what this actually means. In the SOU it is said that it is the Arts Council that have called for this change to reduce administration and increase accuracy of the support (Ibid.). It is hard to comment on this suggestion that waives the arm’s length principle because it seems to be coming from nowhere, but in some texts on cultural policy made by the conservative Moderate party in the beginning of 2000 a similar view point is visible. In a contribution to the cultural policy debate it is said that the purchasing policy for libraries should be politically balanced (Kulturen 2.0, p. 14). In the following publication the sentence has evolved to: “the purchasing policy at public libraries should strive after political diversity”. Concerning the state support to fiction it is said that “Both the state support to literature and the state support to journals should be characterized by a genre diversity and a balance in politics” (Kulturen 3.0, p. 17, my translation). These are two different examples, one bureaucratic and one political, where a discursive position materializes from where the present representation of the problem can be disrupted. There exists at least one possible disruption in the discourse on literature policy where instrumental views are given more room, and the arm’s length principle is put aside, even though these statements haven’t been discussed in a general debate.

The suggestion to add the criterion of financial need of support has by contrast been discussed at length. The current construction of the state support is appreciated by both writers and publishers and few want a new order. One point of criticism being made is that a support with financial judgment is making the state support political. Magnus Eriksson, a former member of the work group, writes in a newspaper that “A strength in the Swedish cultural policy have been that it is apolitical to its content” (Eriksson, 2009-01-26, my translation). This is a very interesting statement because the state support to fiction is a system of distributing funds to different works of art, which is by definition political. I think this quote exemplifies a core issue for the state support: it is seen as apolitical because many actors benefit from it, and because quality is not seen as a political concept with normative views on for example gender.

As we have seen the representation of the problem is defended by the actors that are affected by the system of support. Despite this it has been questioned by the government commission report. Another way of disrupting the problem representation is made from a discursive position that suggests adding a “cultural policy priority” to the support, and thus waiving the arm’s length principle.

Conclusion

The study shows that the state support to fiction holds certain problem representations that mirror values of fiction and reading in society. All policies are results of different values and representations of problems in society, cultural policy is no exception. With Bacchi’s six questions it is possible to create a complex imagery of the support system, where assumptions that are normally taken for granted are uncovered. The system builds on the understanding that there exists both “good” and “bad” books and that the former should be encouraged and the latter suppressed. In close connection to this binary is the view on the book market as something that should be controlled. The work group that decides whether a work of fiction is of great quality or not (i.e. whether it gets support or not) can be seen as gate keepers for the concept of quality. Quality is considered to be a neutral concept even though it contains normative/traditional views, for example, on gender and ought to be analysed from a power perspective. Quality is one key concept of the state support; another is “good books”. The system contains a moral dimension; people should read good books in order to become better persons. The state support to fiction is considered to be the most successful system of funding in cultural policy and have a very strong legitimacy by the stakeholders. Even though a system is well appreciated I still believe that it is important to study it. I think there could be a risk that researcher’s only focus on apparent failures or controversial legislations when studying policies. The state support to fiction is undergoing a change due to recent suggestions from the Ministry of culture to alter the support, and take in account the financial need of support for the individual project. It will be interesting to study how this will change the power relations between the actors in the field of culture and if/ how the new order will be legitimized by the same actors.
I have found that the WPR approach is a useful tool for visualizing how the state support to fiction is legitimized, and how the legitimization is produced, maintained, questioned and reproduced by different actors in the cultural sphere. The methodology also aids in unveiling the power relations that exists within the system. This can in turn help to widen our understanding of how state support to art is perceived. It is of course possible, and desirable, to go deeper in each of these six questions. I plan to study the problem representations of the state support to fiction in depth in my thesis.

This study isn’t about finding the “truth” behind the state support; my aim is to unveil some assumptions or presupposition in the system. Even though the system of support is appreciated it is still built on normative and traditional values. Is this reason enough for the system to change? That is not the scope for this study. My hope is that this study will inspire to review other public policies that seem to be neutral and objective, because as we have learned they never are.

References


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