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## **Failures in Swedish cultural policy, and why cultural policy research does not seem to care**

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### **Biography of the authors**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper, we explore the argument that research on Swedish public cultural policy has not contributed to providing an academically sound and critical basis for assessing basic failures in Swedish cultural policy. The aim of our paper is to tentatively trace a limited selection of explanations for why this is the case and our contribution is thus perhaps best classified as belonging to the meta-study of cultural policy research. We conclude that a basic challenge for the cultural policy research field is its tendency to reproduce normative assumptions generated by cultural policy stakeholders. Research on Swedish cultural policy thus runs the risk of integrating research with the policy sector, rather than provide an autonomous knowledge basis. We argue that one important remedy would be comparative studies, between cultural policies in different countries as well as between different policy fields.

**Keywords:** cultural policy research, cultural policy objectives, autonomy

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### **Introduction**

As researchers on public cultural policy in Sweden, we are increasingly struck by the lack of research that puts the very foundations of public cultural policy under critical scrutiny. For example, it is evident that Swedish cultural policy has failed to reach the overall aim of social equality in cultural participation, despite more than 40 years of efforts. Participation in cultural activities supported by public cultural policy is still dominated by middle-aged, well-educated women living in larger city regions (see, e.g., Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis 2017). It can also be assumed that Swedish public cultural policy has failed in its overall aim to improve the working conditions of professional artists. The average income of professional artists is still below that of other groups of professionals comparable in terms of educational level and place of residence (see, e.g., Konstnärnämnden 2016). In spite of this, Swedish cultural policy has since the 1970s primarily been concerned with organizational details of policy implementation (Henningsen & Blomgren 2017), and the policy agenda has been set by involved stakeholders who have a strong interest in upholding the existing system.

In this paper, we explore our argument that research on Swedish public cultural policy has not contributed to providing an academically sound and critical basis for assessing this kind of basic policy failure. While important research contributions have been made on the primarily rhetorical and discursive shifts in the cultural policies of Sweden and the other Nordic countries (e.g. Duelund et al.

2003; Frenander 2014), research that traces the relationship between policy making, policy implementation and policy outcome seems scarce. With significant exceptions (e.g. Jacobsson 2014; Mangset & Hylland 2017), we can thus identify a need for cultural policy research that provides empirically solid knowledge on this kind of basic policy failure. The aim of our paper is to tentatively trace explanations for why this is the case. Our contribution is thus perhaps best classified as belonging to the meta-study of cultural policy research, drawing on other important contributions on the relation between cultural policy and cultural policy research and the characteristics of such research (e.g. Bennett 2004; Frenander 2008; Gray 2010; Scullion & Garcia 2007; Røyseng 2000; Stavrum & Røyseng 2010). Unlike these contributions, we won't be able to provide a more general reflection on distinctions between different disciplines, approaches or methodologies in cultural policy research. However, we share what could be identified as one of the conclusions drawn in all mentioned contributions, namely that research on cultural policy won't be academically improved by the identification of one single approach or methodology, and probably not by an attempt to establish cultural policy research as a discipline in itself, either. What we will provide is an attempt to take one small step towards a more systematic study of one of the areas in research on Swedish cultural policy that seems more or less neglected by research, regardless of discipline, approach or methodology, and to take this step by trying to pinpoint what we consider to be at least a few important explanations for this neglect.

By cultural policy, we will refer only to public cultural policy, and what has been theoretically defined as explicit cultural policy, that is, “/.../ policies that are explicitly labelled as ‘cultural’” (Ahearne 2009). This is not only an important delimitation of our paper, but an integral part of the argument we wish to explore: there is, on the one hand, an abundance of research on policy making, policy implementation and policy outcome, and equally, on the other hand, an abundance of research on artistic and cultural artifacts and practices. What we thus identify is the lack of research on explicit public governance of artistic and cultural practices in Sweden, and, more precisely, research that pinpoints the relation between policy objectives and policy outcome. By this demarcation, our argument could perhaps be classified as belonging to the “realist methodology” that, according to Clive Gray (2010, p. 223), is primarily concerned with an understanding of cultural policy as “/.../ simply whatever it is that governments say it is, leading to a range of country-specific sets of actions, organisations and choices as the focus of study”. But in no way do we wish to imply that this is the only or the best way to understand cultural policy.

In this paper, we will first provide a very brief introduction to public governance of the arts and culture in Sweden,<sup>1</sup> including how public government has evaluated the outcome of its policy. We will then tentatively explore a selection of potential explanations for why research seems to have failed in identifying the failures of Swedish cultural policy.

### **Public governance of the arts and culture in Sweden**

Sweden is a representative democracy and responsibility for public cultural policy is shared between three levels of government, the state, the regional and the local. In 1974, when the Swedish Parliament in a seminal decision formally established cultural policy as a policy field in its own right, the basic tools of governance were included in the decision: overall objectives, organization, financing, division of responsibility and methods for follow-up and evaluation. Even though, in this paper, we will only provide a slightly more elaborated introduction to objectives and their follow-up and evaluation, we would still like to briefly summarize a few important points about the other tools of governance. The division of responsibility between different levels of government is central to Swedish cultural policy, since it contributes to shape the very foundational prerequisites for public governance of artistic and cultural practices. The far-reaching right of self-determination, including power of taxation, at the regional and local levels has granted regions and municipalities a large degree of political autonomy, especially in cultural policy since the extent of national legislation is very small.

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<sup>1</sup> For a more thorough introduction, please see Harding (2017). Sweden. *Compendium: Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe*. Available at: <https://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/sweden.php> [2018-06-18].

The basic organizational principle for political government is the same at all three levels of government: a publically elected parliament makes decisions on overall objectives, organization and budget in the cultural policy field, while an executive body is responsible for preparing issues to be decided by parliament and of implementing its decisions. At state level, decisions are to a large extent implemented by independent state agencies consisting of civil servants, while, at the local and regional levels, political representation reaches further into the implementation of political decisions. At state level, there are more than 50 state agencies working under the Ministry for Culture, the most dominant of which is the Swedish Arts Council. The Arts Council has the main responsibility for implementing the national objectives, by granting state subsidies to institution-based cultural activities. Since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the state and local levels of government have basically shared financial responsibility for public cultural policy, that is, the state and municipalities have supplied a little more than 40 percent each while the regional level has supplied a little below 10 percent (Swedish Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis, 2015). Over the last 10 years, however, the regional level has increased its share to 15 percent, primarily due to the introduction of the Cultural Co-operation Model in 2010, a reform of the allocation of state level subsidies to regional cultural activities. At all three political levels, public funding is primarily allocated to institutionally based cultural activities. Regions and municipalities have since the 1970s chosen the path as vehicles and implementers of state cultural policy rather than the path of self-sufficient and independent cultural policy makers (Blomgren & Johannisson 2014; 2016). Since 1974, it is the regional level that has undergone more dramatic changes while organization at both state and municipal level has basically regained the same structure. From the late 1990s and onwards, different regional reforms have been initiated but not nationally implemented; reforms aiming at amalgamating county councils into larger regions, primarily for reasons of efficiency but rhetorically motivated by decentralization. As of now, Sweden consists of several different solutions at the regional level, while this level has been given increased (financial) responsibility, not least due to the so-called Cultural Cooperation Model established in 2010.

#### *Objectives and evaluations*

Included in the seminal cultural policy decision of 1974 were eight objectives for state cultural policy. These objectives were revised by the Swedish Parliament in 1996 as a result of a state committee report on cultural policy; most noticeable was the introduction of the concept of quality as an objective for cultural policy, as well as a shift in rhetoric on the role of public cultural policy in relation to commercial culture. Also, since 1996 the objectives are denominated as ‘national’ instead of ‘state’ objectives, that is, they formally include only state cultural policy but should be national in reach. After an additional state committee report, the Swedish parliament in 2009 decided on the following – and current – cultural policy objectives:

The objectives for cultural policy are that culture is to be a dynamic, challenging and independent force based on freedom of expression, that everyone is to be able to participate in cultural life, and that creativity, diversity and artistic quality are to be integral parts of society’s development.

To achieve these objectives, cultural policy is to:

- promote opportunities for everyone to experience culture, participate in educational programmes and develop their creative abilities;
- promote quality and artistic renewal;
- promote a dynamic cultural heritage that is preserved, used and developed;
- promote international and intercultural exchange and cooperation; and
- pay particular attention to the rights of children and young people to culture. (Government Offices of Sweden, 2018-06-08)

In this decision, ‘national’ was qualified in the following way: “The new cultural policy objectives should be national, that is, govern state cultural policy. They should also serve as an inspiration to policy making in municipalities and regions” (National government bill 2009/10:3, p. 28, our transl.). Again, this qualification reflected what had become practice in municipalities and regions since 1974

and onwards; rather than developing objectives unique to a particular municipality or region, the local and regional levels of government have chosen to adapt to and often directly copy state objectives. This is not least evident in the “Cultural Policy Position Paper” adopted in 2015 by SALAR, the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions which represents the governmental, professional and employer-related interests of Sweden's 290 municipalities and 20 county regions.

Since 1974, there have been three major attempts to evaluate cultural policy outcome at the overall level; one led by the Swedish Arts Council in 1984, one initiated by the Council of Europe as part of its investigations of national cultural policies in 1989, and one led by the parliamentary committee on public cultural policy in 1995.

The question is often asked: has cultural policy been successful? Of course this is a question that cannot be answered in any definite way. But it is possible to show to what extent development has been in the direction that the national cultural policy objectives have designated. (The Swedish Arts Council 1984, p. 11, our transl.)

This quote is from the introduction to a report published by the Swedish Arts Council in 1984, that aimed at describing – rather than formally evaluating – development in the cultural policy field since the seminal parliamentary decision of 1974. While the report emphasizes the general positive development of public cultural policy, it also displays concern over several issues, not least the fact that, at the time, two thirds of Swedish municipalities had not yet established cultural policy objectives of their own (*ibid.*, p. 44). The concern doesn't seem to be primarily about the difficulty of follow-up that comes with the lack of objectives, but the lack of objectives in itself. Objectives are considered as important “guiding principles” (*ibid.*, p. 16), necessary for making the changes needed, and for making assessment of development possible. That the national cultural policy objectives could be considered more as an expression of general intentions than as specific goals to be evaluated by quantitative indicators is the conclusion drawn also by the European “group of experts” that evaluated Swedish cultural policy in 1989-1990 (Council of Europe 1990, p. 27). While the group of experts generally assesses Swedish cultural policy as successful in terms of both improved working conditions of professional artists and increased participation in cultural activities by citizens, one of its suggestions for further measures is to develop short-term action plans rather than attempt to revise the national cultural policy objectives in themselves (*ibid.*, p. 155ff.). In its other suggestions, the group of experts is more concerned with weaknesses related to conditions for artistic quality and artistic renewal and how to make this possible by establishing “cultural centres” outside of the capital of Stockholm than with increasing cultural participation.

The Council of Europe's conclusion that Sweden has perhaps reached as far as it is possible in terms of increasing participation in cultural activities is also referred to in the parliamentary committee's evaluation report of 1994 (SOU 1994:85, p. 678), that contributed to the aforementioned revision of national cultural policy objectives in 1996. The evaluation report could also be said to follow up on the advice given by the European Council to increase emphasis on artistic quality, thus supporting the introduction of ‘quality’ into national cultural policy objectives. While the evaluation report confirms that cultural participation is after 20 years of more systematic cultural policy efforts still heavily dependent on the classical socio-economic factors of level of income, level of education, gender and place of residence, it deems the national cultural policy objectives as a basically effective tool of governance in terms of providing the kind of “guiding principles” (*ibid.*, p. 716), that the reports by the Swedish Arts Council and the Council of Europe refer to.

The three major evaluations of Swedish cultural policy since 1974 thus seem to agree that in terms of its overall objectives, cultural policy should generally be deemed as successful. Suggestions for further improvement are directed at fine-tuning the existing system rather than at making any radical changes. The evaluations thus contribute to the consolidation of Swedish cultural policy. Between the reports, there is over time an increased focus on the need for systematic knowledge production to support further policy improvement and change. In Sweden, a major challenge has since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century been identified in the lack of uniformly shaped and continuously updated statistics, for example on

citizens' participation in cultural activities. This challenge is also highlighted in all three evaluation reports. Partly to meet this challenge, the National Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis was established in 2011. This agency is now responsible for the official cultural statistics (except for the library sector), but its tasks are also to evaluate the effects of cultural policy in relation to the national cultural policy objectives, evaluate political measures and systematically follow up on the financing structures of the cultural sector. The establishment of an agency with specific responsibility for the evaluation of public cultural policy singles Sweden out from the other Nordic countries. It is even more important since follow-up and evaluation of cultural policy is a diminishing activity at SALAR, and also in smaller regions and municipalities. SALAR therefore refers to the national agency for nationally relevant knowledge production in the cultural policy field. So far, the agency has not been able to provide any overall evaluations of cultural policy objectives.

### **The institutional settings of cultural policy**

As pointed out in the previous paragraph it was in 1974 the official formation of public cultural policy in Sweden was completed, in terms of the establishment of a formalized institutional structure with specific organization for making and implementing political decisions, as well as allocating resources, and including a specific rhetoric on the contents of cultural policy expressed in the national cultural objectives. This official formation basically confirmed ideas and practices of institutional settings that existed prior to 1974, a circumstance that is also emphasized in the previously mentioned evaluations of cultural policy. The institutional settings were characterized by an absence of steering opportunities for political government, granting the implementation bodies a highly significant degree of autonomy. Even though the Swedish political system is generally based on the principle of national agencies that implement political decisions – a trait that, according to the Council of Europe (1990) singles Sweden out from other European countries – this organizational principle is in the cultural policy field taken to its extreme based in the constitutive notion of autonomy for the arts and culture. As a result, Swedish political governance has been vague and careful, leaving it to implementing bodies to determine the actual content of political decisions (Blomgren 2012). Garne (1994) has therefore designated the Swedish cultural policy sector as an “autonomous republic” where the profession sets the agenda instead of politicians. The institutional settings of Swedish public cultural policy have thus developed over a longer period of time, and by what is called path-dependency established institutional relations and ideas of what should be considered as the “right way” to talk about cultural policy and which agents that should set the agenda (Pierson 2000). By creating different and autonomous cultural fields in economic and aesthetic terms, artists and cultural institutions, according to Vestheim (2009), protect themselves against the powerful influence of politicians as well as the market forces. The so-called “arm's length principle” seems to have become the accepted term for the notion that politicians should not make concrete decisions on arts funding, either by expressing strong opinions of taste or by making professional judgements about quality (Hutchinson 1982; Upchurch 2016).

This principle also implies a relatively independent and artistically competent “arts council”, or some other “arm's length body”, that takes care of the allocation of public subsidies to the arts community. In Swedish cultural policy, the term itself was not introduced until 2010, in a public committee report on the Cultural Cooperation Model (SOU 2010:11, p. 12), although the underlying idea that political bodies should not govern the content of artistic and cultural activities was expressed already in the elaborations given to the national cultural objectives decided in 1974 (The Swedish Arts Council 1984, p. 26). Even though the arm's length principle expresses a distance between political decision-making bodies and implementing bodies that goes across policy sectors in the Swedish political system, it has by cultural policy agents been co-opted as a trait, if not unique then at least more constitutional for the cultural policy sector than for other policy sectors. Interestingly, cultural policy researchers have also adopted the term, to the extent that it is, to our minds mistakenly, taken for granted as an analytical concept rather than considered as a linguistic tool used by cultural policy stakeholders in a specific institutional setting to further specific interests.

One example of how thoroughly established the institutional settings of Swedish cultural policy have become, is the absence of debates on the more underlying principles among politicians and actors involved in this field. In Sweden, policy debates on a principal level concerning whether or not the

state should support, for example, film as an art form, were frequent in the parliament before 1963, when the Swedish Film Institute was established. This policy area became institutionalized through the establishment of an autonomous institute which set down criteria for what should be considered high quality in films and which functions should be responsible for applying these criteria. After 1963, debates on film policy were primarily characterized by issues such as the shortage of financial resources for making films, and the lack of influence over film policy for film workers and other professional agents (Blomgren 1998). In other artistic fields such as theatre, opera and art museums these segmented structures, of who had been made responsible for the implementation of cultural policy, were established much earlier. In sum, once the state has decided to support and institutionalize art institutions, these institutions have had an essential impact on agenda setting in cultural policy.

The institutional settings have also resulted in essential difficulties for the government and parliament to implement objectives that are considered to threaten or interfere with the autonomy of the artistic and cultural field. Amongst politicians and actors in the cultural field there has, since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, been a consensus about the importance of the overall objective of cultural policy to promote social equality in cultural participation but, as noticed initially in this paper, policy has failed in this regard. In the 1990s, national government tried to introduce the policy that 20 percent of state subsidies to opera and theatre houses should be used by the institutions to fulfil the objective of social equality. The proposal was met by heavy resistance and politicians were accused of violating the autonomy of the arts. This effort to govern failed, and opera and theatre houses went back to business as usual (Blomgren & Blomgren 2002).

Another example is the introduction of the Cultural Cooperation Model, the new way of allocating national government funding to regional cultural activities. When the model was presented in a state committee report on cultural policy (SOU 2009:16), it aimed to strengthen the possibilities for regions to make their own priorities when designating national government subsidies to regional cultural institutions. This proposal was also met by a tremendous resistance and opposition from state agencies such as the Swedish Arts Council, as well as interest organizations in the artistic field. In this case, it was argued that the autonomy of the arts would be threatened by giving more power to regional politicians. The outcome of the “Cultural Cooperation Model”, which was initially presented as an important decentralization reform, was that national government strengthened rather than loosened its direction of regional cultural policy. An important reason for this seems to be that the regions consider themselves to be the administrators of national cultural policy rather than autonomous cultural policymakers (Blomgren & Johannisson 2014; 2016).

These two examples illustrate that attempts at comprehensive and fundamental reforms can easily be perceived as threats to the prevailing cultural policy order and will, therefore, meet with massive protests. The actual reforms in this policy area have been “harmless” organizational reforms, such as the final version of the “Cultural Cooperation Model” that will not threaten, but rather strengthen, the existing institutional order (Henningsen & Blomgren 2017). This order is firmly anchored in a fundamental consensus, shared by politicians, civil servants and artists, that cultural policy should primarily concern itself with increasing public financial resources to existing cultural institutions and professional artistic activities.

### **What about cultural policy research? The meeting between two fields that claim autonomy**

As discussed above the institutional settings of cultural policy have been characterized by a significant influence of stakeholders who have claimed autonomy for the arts and the artists and thereby rejected political governance of the cultural field, while still being financed by the political system. Today, the arguments for autonomy are often related to quality; that is, the contents of artistic activities should only be influenced and assessed by artists if these activities are to be of the highest quality. Other arguments relate more clearly to the historical circumstances that shaped the original incentive for what is now called the arm’s length principle; that is, the experiences of the Second World War that effectively made evident the results of very explicit political governance of artistic and cultural content. These two clusters of argumentation are also integral to the institutional settings of university based research in Sweden. In several ways, these settings mirror those of cultural policy: the academic

freedom that was a constitutional element of Wilhelm von Humboldt's vision for universities, a vision that has strongly influenced Swedish policy for research and higher education (Erikson 2018, p. 14), is dependent on autonomous researchers who work at autonomous universities. An equally important element, also evident in cultural policy, is that quality in academic research can only be assessed by other researchers; what we usually refer to as the principle of peer review. Erikson argues that academic freedom was after the second world war deemed the optimal organization of “/.../ such a complex activity as research, where there was no way to govern activities based on assumptions about which roads would most gain the development of knowledge” (ibid., p. 15, our transl.). Again, the parallel between academic and artistic activities seems obvious.

We have no interest in questioning the claims on autonomy *per se*, neither for artistic activities nor for academic research. Quite the contrary: as researchers we would rather like to focus on the question of whether researchers on Swedish cultural policy has upheld the autonomous position they (we) claim. Has research on Swedish cultural policy provided distanced and critical studies of cultural policy or has it rather tended to reproduce the normative assumptions of the policy field? With reference to our own experience we would argue that research on Swedish cultural policy has tended towards the latter. In the following, we would like to offer a few examples.

### **Researchers' assumptions about the arts, artists and cultural policy**

We have, over the years, identified a tendency that cultural policy researchers tend to reproduce normative assumptions generated by the cultural policy sector. Some researchers are refreshingly open and explicit about this, such as when Anna Upchurch (2016, p. vi) declares in the introduction to her book on the origins of the Arts Council Movement: “I am an enthusiastic and committed supporter of government subsidies for the arts as practiced in the United Kingdom for the past 70 years /.../”. But, as also Heidi Stavrum and Sigrid Røyseng (2010) have noted, such normative assumptions are more often implicit and taken for granted. This tendency is explored in a recent paper on how research has defined the role of libraries in society (Audunson et al. 2017). The paper presents a study of research articles, primarily from library and information science, and concludes that several of the articles included in the study display a tendency of normative contributions based on axiomatic values. The library is *per se* defined as a “good” institution that contributes positively to democracy, social inclusion and sustainable communities. However, with few exceptions, there were not many contributions that empirically attempted to document if and to what extent libraries contribute to inclusion and enlightened public discourse (ibid). It would seem, then, that researchers basically agree with the cultural policy sector that public support to the arts and culture is necessary, and also that cultural policy and the arts have important roles in “creating a better world”. And that they transfer these assumptions into their research on cultural policy.

The arts and culture as a fundamental good to be distributed by public governance is never questioned, but considered an axiomatic value. Instead, arguments and efforts are focused on describing the necessity of the arts and culture for society. To increase legitimacy, such arguments are – especially at the regional and local levels of government – increasingly based in the assumed positive effects of arts and culture on other values, external to the artistic and cultural field. Here, we will only mention a few examples, such as the impact of culture on economic growth, health or sustainable development (Blomgren & Johannisson 2014; Johannisson 2015; cf. Belfiore & Bennett 2007). Interestingly, these themes have also increasingly become highlighted by Swedish research funding agencies, as well as by the European Union's framework program Horizon 2020, thus supporting research that supports the normative assumptions of cultural policy itself.

### **Researchers' defending the policy field from the evil market**

Another characteristic of Swedish cultural policy that is often transferred to research is an unfavorable view of the market, which implies the market's negative impact on the cultural field. We have identified that among cultural policy researchers it is not uncommon that capitalism or market economy in a historical perspective usually has been seen as an explanatory variable to understand change in arts and cultural policies. In contemporary cultural policy research, globalisation, diversity,

neo-liberalism, late modernity and the experience society are examples of prominent factors when wanting to understand how external conditions influence cultural policies. How these different structural processes are interconnected is also an increasingly important cultural policy research issue. Jim McGuigan (2004), for example, connects globalisation to neo-liberalism, pointing out that it is a neo-liberal account of globalisation that tends to dominate in late modern Western societies. But there is a lack of empirical research identifying how and in what way these external forces influence the policy area. For example, is the impact the same across different artistic fields, different political levels of government and different countries?

Researchers are also involved in identifying the negative influence of commercial culture on people. In Sweden, educational scientists, sociologists and psychologists have been involved in different research projects describing how foremost children and adolescents have been affected by commercial culture such as Hollywood movies, pulp fiction, video violence etc. In 1982, The Swedish Arts Council published a report called *Five Researchers on Culture Commercialism*. In this report, people's use of commercial culture was explained by theories of repressed needs:

Man's short-term requests can originate from repressed needs or be seen as compensation for unmet needs. On a short-term basis, it is often both more comfortable and more pleasurable to repress needs than to mobilise your forces and satisfy them /.../. Intensive use of commercial culture can be understood in this light. (Ibid., p. 166)

The above quote displays how researchers lend arguments based on scientific methods to legitimize the objective from 1974 to fight against the negative influences of commercial culture. An axiomatic value, in this case that commercial culture is damaging to the people, was the starting point for research. In the 1970s and 1980s, there was a considerable consensus among politicians and actors involved in cultural policy to fight against commercial culture. This, in turn, was a relevant argument to support the "real arts" in Sweden to be an alternative to commercial culture that most citizens somehow engaged in. Even though the explicit national objective of cultural policy to counteract the negative effects of commercialism was removed in the parliamentary decision of 2009, the assumption that the output of public cultural policy is qualitatively distinct from commercial culture still remains.

### **Researchers against political involvement in the art: The fear of governance itself?**

Even if we have identified a positive stance amongst cultural policy researchers to state involvement in the cultural field, the notion of the autonomy of the arts and the artist seems to have been accepted as an axiomatic value amongst the researchers. Even if the arm's length principle is neither a theoretical nor analytical concept, but rather conveys a normative assumption implying that politicians should steer as little as possible, this concept has often been used to identify the specific constitution of cultural policy. As we have already noted, the arm's length principle is a relatively new concept in Swedish cultural policy, but it has had a significant impact and seems to be taken for granted both in academic research (see, e.g., Frenander, ed., 2012) and in reports by the recently established National Agency for Cultural Policy Analysis (e.g. 2018).

In a preface to the academic research journal *Nordisk Kulturpolitisk Tidskrift, NKT* (no.1, 2015), the editor highlights the arm's length principle as the main rule of the cultural policy field and how this principle is today challenged by right-wing radicals who ask why politicians should renounce the possibility to influence the contents of the arts. While certainly not questioning the need for research on the effect of new radical right-wing parties on cultural policy in the Nordic countries, it is interesting that it is only these radical right-wing parties that are considered as threats in terms of them wanting to govern the artistic and cultural field. We would rather argue that the arm's length principle is in itself a very effective tool of governance, a tool that cultural policy makers have adopted from the professionals working in the field, but a tool of governance none the less.

To our mind, what is missing in research on Swedish cultural policy is a principal and critical discussion about the concept of the arm's length principle, the role it has played historically and in comparison with the relation between government and activities in other policy fields. One crucial

question that is seldom asked by cultural policy researchers is what kind of steering of the arts that can be identified in the institutions and among the artists, given that the arm's length principle is implemented. One possible problem with such a setting can be that financial support is given to artists that have the same political ideals or are friends with the juries that are set to implement autonomy. Theoretically, we can have a democratic problem if autonomous institutions use their autonomy to produce undemocratic values. The problems with an independent artistic and cultural field have not been problematized enough in cultural policy research, and this is, perhaps not surprisingly, not a problem that the organized interests in the field wish to have research on.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper we have discussed the lack of research that puts the very foundations of public cultural policy under critical scrutiny. We have presented a tentative selection of explanations for this state of affairs. One such explanation could be found in the institutional settings of public cultural policy in Sweden, which display a strong path-dependency, so strong that even the neo-liberal turn could be considered as a mere continuation of the same political-bureaucratic rationale of social democratic welfare policy (Vestheim 2018). Despite evaluations and increased emphasis on management by objectives and performance, cultural policy stakeholders, primarily representing implementing bodies have successfully defended the foundations of cultural policy from being disrupted.

We have identified at least one fundamental problem in the relation between academic research and the cultural policy field: it would seem that cultural policy researchers have (willingly) given up their traditional claim on academic autonomy to serve the claim on autonomy made by the arts and culture instead. The result is that the same axiomatic values among stakeholders in cultural policy are shared by researchers: culture and the arts are excellent and vital for society, the market is a threat to the real arts, and politicians should steer as little as possible.

When political government on different levels want to verify or change their chosen direction, researchers have been engaged in legitimizing the already existing path. One problem deriving from a blurred boundary between politics and science, including unclear differentiations of roles and functions, is that the researcher's critical role in society could be reduced to the reproduction of existing dominating ideologies or paradigms in cultural policy. Regions, state authorities and the European Union are enhancing this problem by promoting research projects that only seek to optimize the implementation of normative assumptions that are not in themselves scrutinized. The fact that academic institutions legitimize chosen policies turns researchers into cultural policy stakeholders, involved in policy making, which could be a major democratic problem (Blomgren 2017).

We believe that Sweden is not exceptional in having this blurred and unclear boundary between researchers and cultural policy stakeholders. But we would need comparative research, both across national borders and also across different policy fields, to know whether this belief is valid only for Sweden and only for cultural policy.

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