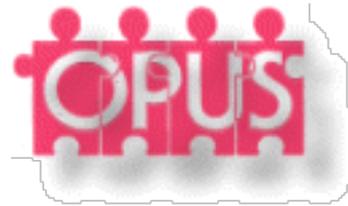


## AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY (OPUS)

### Sweden and the World at the Dawn of 2015 Report of a New Year's Listening Post



Encouraging The Reflective Citizen

#### **Part 1. THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS AND EXPERIENCES.**

In this part of the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experience in their various social roles, be those in work, unemployed, or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood or voluntary or leisure organisations, or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives', that relating to the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

The meeting took place the day after the demonstration in Paris, Stockholm and many other cities around the world in response to the terror attack in Paris. The opening comments came from the role of Swedish citizen and news consumer. One participant expressed gratitude for the life one is able to live in Sweden, which the events had brought to the fore. Major discrepancies in the experience and values attached to national unity were described by a participant who had once lived in France – "The French are so much better at unity". In the role of Swedish citizen, it was initially a lack of solidarity rather than terror-inspired fear that was described.

In the role of Swedish citizen working abroad, the "Los indignados" (The Indignant) movement, which has gathered citizens in Spain and Greece in mass movements to protest against the economic and social consequences of the crisis and against the emerging far-right, was described. By comparison, Swedish manifestations of similar initiatives seem weak and relatively insignificant.

Gradually, one participant remembered taking part as a demonstrator in connection with the hunt for the so-called Laser Man (who shot 11 dark-skinned people in the space of six months before being arrested following an extensive police operation). The feeling of fear and vulnerability during a small demonstration at one of the sites of the shootings was described as an important memory of profound significance. It was later also mentioned how the role of demonstrator implies taking a definite stance that affects and changes us as individuals, even if the short-term impact of a demonstration can be difficult to ascertain. This came as a response to how several participants spoke of being dubious about the rapidly fading

expressions of indignation and solidarity.

In connection with this, the role of relative was also mentioned: In the event of extreme occurrences, many people initially feel a need to localise, contact and seek the company of their closest relatives, even when there is no strong expression of belonging otherwise.

The role of relative was also discussed with examples from the role of school leader: parents who make unreasonable demands on teachers and school, who are constantly displeased and who battle with teachers and school leaders only to then give presents to principals at the end of the school years with the line "I've just been doing my job!". The relative perspective was described later also from the perspective of the health and geriatric care services, in which the relative is often translated into a callous, demanding, militant quality controller.

From the role of chairperson of a tenants' association, it was described how the word "association" has been given a one-sided connotation from the world of personal asset management, which increasingly sidelines social cohesion, consideration and care for other association members. One consequence of asset management is the incessant renovation of private apartments and the associations' properties. Aspects of this were also described in the role of disturbed neighbour on the Sunday morning.

The recent encroachments into Swedish territorial waters and airspace by Russia and Russian aggression on the world stage were described as a factor of concern in the role of Swedish citizen.

Rising xenophobia worried most of the participants and it was pointed out that regional conflicts often conceal powerful economic and territorial ambitions.

It was also noted that human beings have such enormous potential to change the Earth's crust, the oceans and the atmosphere that the fundamental conditions of life for our entire species could thus also be changed.

In the role of consumer in the convenience goods trade in an affluent middle-class area, surprise was described at the natural pretentiousness of many customers. The line "You really don't have any provincial Italian pastrami?" illustrates the unreflecting assumption that they have the self-evident right to the all the world's delicacies at any time and to always have access to the best of everything.

An association was drawn from this to a monologue with a famous comic who calls a local government office "just to check if he has any more, as yet unknown rights to exploit". The phenomenon that the

monologue describes concerns the way of perceiving rights as something to be nonchalantly taken for granted and exploited to the fullest extent possible, and was recognised immediately by most of the group.

In the role of young citizen working at a fast-growing company in the service industry, the discovery of the joy and wellbeing inherent in doing things together was described; this was placed in contrast to the satisfaction of individual achievement, which is stressed so strongly by schools and in higher education.

The self-centred younger generation was described from the role of manager. Employees are more interested in their individual career projects than the demands their jobs place on them. At the same time, they expect to receive almost total care and attention from the companies and managers they work for. This greatly diminished faculty for self-reliance was ascribed to the generation born in the 1980s, which is sometimes referred to as the EMLA Generation (named after a children's analgesic patch). This generation was described as spoiled and full of high expectations and demands on its environment.

In the role of urbanite, it was described with the aid of Maslow's hierarchy of needs how we only focus on the very pinnacle of the pyramid – i.e. self-actualisation. This long-lasting, general freedom from having to secure more basic needs makes us particularly vulnerable at times of sudden disruption and change. The consequence of a prolonged power-cut and/or IT server outage was described in terms of Stockholm becoming a city of zombies after four days.

Another aspect of generational differences was raised by a participant in the role of pensioner, who described the massive indifference he encounters in children and younger family members when he goes to share his experiences. At the same time, he also admits never listening to his own parents.

## **Part 2. IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES**

In Part 2 the aim was to collectively identify the major themes emerging from Part 1. From several presented these have been drawn together under the following interrelated themes:

An idea of a possible paradigm shift was presented. The role of citizen is now one of a passive demander and consumer of rights relieved of personal responsibility.

The particular conditions under which different generations lived was another theme. The post-war generation, which participated in the development of Swedish society and rising prosperity are now in their

satisfied and contented senior years. Later generations have been raised to a life of high demands and expectations, but are also predicted to be the first not to have it better than their parents.

The lack of perceived link to this past and fewer conversations and occupations that bridge the generational gap at home and at work are other examples of generational themes.

Other themes were anxiety about the future as well as the sense of being poorly equipped to deal with changes to the fundamental conditions of life in Sweden and other dire circumstances.

### **Part 3. ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION**

In this part of the Listening Post the members were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2, with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and, developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here the members were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world. Their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them. The resulting analysis has been distilled into the following two interrelated hypotheses:

One hypothesis is that extreme political and religious convictions can lead to actions and expressions rooted in a threatened or insecure political and/or religious identity. Feelings of impotence in the face of real threats, such as those posed by war, climate change and terrorism, plus isolation and a fragile national and/or religious identity bring considerable risks. One such is the emergence of extreme acts that are almost impossible to predict and prevent.

Instead, the need of community and a sense of identity is satisfied in areas such as personal development, sport, personal branding or the extensive non-parliamentary movement for corporeal and spiritual happiness and inner growth. This burgeoning industry and obsession can be seen as another means of handling a fragile identity. By nurturing, coaching, cultivating or training our body and soul, we satisfy our need for meaning and togetherness, which does not find its expression in the role of active participant in society. Similarly, fantasies about being who or want you want can have devastating personal consequences when competence and experience prove more important than dreams in finding one's role as a citizen.

The insight of our fragility and our own mortality give rise to insufferable feelings of vulnerability. Our longing can manifest itself in a desire for strong, wise leaders.

To sum up, the group discussed the possibilities of being able to even create hypotheses on contemporary life in the first place. We seek linear and rational explanatory models in order to predict events, but this is actually impossible. Development and real change often take place in the form of random eruptions and breakthroughs, making it difficult to predict the future and formulate hypotheses on our current times.

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