WHEN WOMEN REPLACE WORKING CLASS – A Critical Comment on the Concept of Equality in Social Democratic Higher Education Policy

Anett Schenk, Lund University, Sweden

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During the 1960’s and 1970’s European education systems underwent a period of enlargement and opening. This process was forced by Social Democratic governments as a measure to realise social justice and improve educational chances for the working class as well as people with a low social status. Various researchers have maintained that the basic conditions for Social Democratic parties have changed and that the process of modernisation put parties under adaptation-pressure. This may also have an impact on higher education policies realised by Social Democratic governments and on the ideas of equality expressed in these policies.

It is the concern of this paper to evaluate if and how Social Democratic higher education policy changed from the mid-1960’s to 2000. Merkel did pronounce the ability of European Social Democracy to adapt to its “environment” and he described the history of Social Democracy as “a history of continuing revision of ‘ways’ and ‘goals’”. Taking this into consideration it is reasonable to expect that Social Democratic governments did change their focus and concepts in higher education policies. By comparing the higher education policies of Social Democratic governments in Sweden and Germany I will show that this expectation is correct and how this adaptation changed the focus on equality in higher education policies.

During the 1960’s and 1970’s Social Democratic governments in Sweden and Germany followed a strategy of enlargement in their higher education policies. The main idea was that a broader supply of higher education would increase the life-chances of people from lower social classes or with a lower educational background. In the following years the numbers of higher education institutions, students and academic staff increased rapidly. Nevertheless the political goals of that time were not realised, the enlargement of the educational system did not challenge the allocation structures for working class people in higher education. In contrast to the intended result of Social Democratic enlargement policies women turned out to be the winners of this strategy, their participation rate in higher education increased since the 1970’s and the educational gender gap has been reversed. Then, during the 1980’s and 1990’s women appeared as a group of interest in Social Democratic policy documents. The gender question was integrated into the rhetoric on equality in higher education. A comparison of Social Democratic higher education policies shows that Social Democratic governments actually did adapt to changing frame conditions. The central term in policy-rhetoric remained the same during the last forty years, but the contend shifted: since the 1980’s “equality of chances” was not longer related to lower social classes but to the equality between sexes. The paper will discuss the motivation and impact of this development.