

RESEARCH PROBLEM

I am going to investigate the discourse concerning “arbetslinjen”, one of the cornerstones of the politics of the Swedish government. There are no official English translation of arbetslinjen. Swedish scientist Malin Junestav¹ uses “work strategy”, so I am going to use that translation as well.

The definition of the work strategy is basically that everyone should work as much as possible. Unemployed must actively seek employment or participate in labour market programs in order to get unemployment insurance.

The work strategy in Swedish politics is like mum's meatballs. Everyone is for, but without mentioning the recipe². All governments since the 1930's has had arbetslinjen as official strategy, regardless of political colour. There has been small differences between left-wing and right-wing governments regarding their view on work. There are debates in the parliament but in the end of the day everyone agrees. According to Swedish sociologist Roland Paulsen³ there has not been so much consensus regarding any other idea or strategy since the social democratic takeover in 1920. The work strategy is almost a state ideology.

Since the election 2006 the right wing government has initiated the most extreme strategy so far with tougher demands on unemployed, suspended sickness insurance and worse conditions concerning unemployment insurance.

I want to find out what the work strategy really means. I want to describe its ideological dimension, “the meaning in the service of power⁴”. To put it short: what does it mean when the government speaks of the work strategy?

METHOD OF ANALYSIS

I have chosen Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), mainly for two reasons, its focus on resistance and on the social practice. According to Jørgensen and Philips⁵ the basic assumptions behind CDA is:

- (1) The character of social and cultural processes and structures is partly linguistic-discursive.
- (2) Discourse is both constitutive and constituted
- (3) Language should be empirically analysed within its social context
- (4) Discourse functions ideologically
- (5) Critical research

In my opinion this means that discourse is only one layer of reality among others. Discourse is both constructed by other discourses and forms of reality and in the the

1 Junestav Malin, (2004) Arbetslinjer i svensk socialpolitisk debatt och lagstiftning 1930-2001. Uppsala: Ekonomisk- historiska Institutionen, Uppsala Universitet.

2 Hedborg, Anna et al (2005) Vad är arbetslinjen - samtal om socialförsäkring nr4 Stockholm: Socialförsäkringsutredningen s6

3 Paulsen, Roland (2010) Arbetssamhället Malmö: Gleerups p53

4 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage p 75

5 Jørgensen and Philips (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage pp 61-64

same time, it constructs reality. To understand discourse you have to analyse its context, for example the time and space where it is produced. Discourse also contributes to and reproduces power relations, and last the researcher should have a critical approach.

In my case the discourse of arbetslinjen is one among other realities, for example unemployed people, the National Labour Market Board, politicians and so on.

The discourse of arbetslinjen is constructed by other discourses. One of them is "The analysis of markets with search frictions" which won its originators the Nobel Prize in economy 2010. It also constructs other discourses. The work strategy has had a great impact on for example discourses concerning the health care system.

In order to understand the discourse of the work strategy I have to analyse its context. In what way is it related to the social practice?

The discourse of the work strategy also contributes to and reproduces power relations. In my opinion it is one of the most common ways to justify neoliberal politics. And last but not least, I should have a critical approach to the discourse of work strategy.

CHOICE OF MATERIAL

The work strategy, as a political concept, has been around since the 1930's. Everyone has an opinion about it. At the same time surprisingly little has been written about it. Since I am interested in the ideological dimension, the "meaning in the service of power"⁶, I am looking for some kind of official statement.

Fortunately the former Swedish Minister for Employment Sven Otto Littorin actually made a painting of the work strategy, complete with a tagline. I want to use his painting as my primary material. As minister of Employment Sven Otto Littorin became a symbol of the work strategy when he was elected in 2006.

When I found out about the painting a year ago I put it on my weblog. Soon people started to send me their own versions of Sven Otto Littorin's painting. I arranged a contest which was mentioned in both newspapers and television. Thanks to this I got around 40 different versions.

I discovered that the versions were of course not just about art, but first of all about the work strategy as social reality. I am going to include some of these versions as well. This, I think, is a good example of how discourse constitutes reality and vice versa. And I also think they reveal a good deal about the ideological dimension of Littorin's painting.

⁶ Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage
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“Arbetslinjen” by Sven Otto Littorin.

Tagline: The work strategy: what separates the squared, controlled from the free, the empowerment. (Arbetslinjen: Det som skiljer det inrutade, kontrollerade från det fria, från egenmakten).

CATEGORIES OF ANALYSIS

First of all, it is not just an analysis I am about to carry out, it is also a critique. Critical Discourse analysis implies a critical engagement with the contemporary world⁷.

I am critical to ideological version of the work strategy. It has very little to do with work. In my opinion it is a way to keep wages and inflation down. I am especially critical against the use of the word freedom in connection to the work strategy.

*But CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis) is not just another form of academic analysis. It also has aspirations to take part of those who suffer from linguistic-discursive forms of domination and exploitation. Part of the task is to contribute to the development and spread of a critical awareness as a factor in domination*⁸.

So if ideology is meaning in the service of power, I want to find out in what way the discourse of the work strategy serves power.

I want to use Norman Faircloughs three-dimensional model⁹ as method for my analysis and critique. It applies the concept of discourse in three different ways. The discourse of the work strategy:

- (1) Is a text, or in this particular case a form of text, more precisely a painting and versions of the same painting.
- (2) Is also a discursive practice, which involves production and consumption of texts
- (3) Is a social practice

First I have to concentrate on the formal features of the texts. They are all images, but some of them also have taglines. I have to describe what the images looks like and what the taglines expresses.

Second I have to put the images in a discursive context. One basic assumption in CDA is that texts are intertextual or even links in intertextual chains¹⁰. Each text is a part of a series that incorporates elements from other texts. They draw on earlier texts and thereby contribute to historical development. I will look for different kinds of agency in the images and I will also examine how the messages in the images are expressed. As truths, as opinions, as facts or perhaps as exhortations? I other words, I will investigate the level of interdiscursivity, transitivity and modality in the images¹¹.

Last but not least I have to focus on the broader social dimension of which the discourse of the work strategy are a part. It relates to different levels of social organization, such as the situation, the institutional context and the wider social context¹².

7 Chouliaraki, Lilie and Fairclough, Norman (1999) *Discourse in Late Modernity* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. p35

8 Fairclough, Norman (1995) *Critical Discourse Analysis* New York: Longman p186

9 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage pp 66-71

10 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage p74

11 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage p73-86

12 Tischer, Stefan et al (2000) *Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis* London: Sage p151

This involves of course discursive but also non-discursive aspects. I could for example analyse to what economic conditions the discourse is subject. What are the ideological, political and social consequences of the discursive practice? Does the discursive practice conceal and strengthen unequal power relations¹³?

ANALYSIS

The first step of my analysis is to describe the formal features of the texts. In my case, what the images looks like.

***Arbetslinjen* by Sven Otto Littorin**

The image is separated in two halves by a black line, presumably “arbetslinjen” (“the line of work” in swedish). Above the line there is blue sky and a sunset or a dawn. Under the line there are coloured squares. Most of them are red or green which also are the colours of the swedish opposition. The painting also has a tagline, *The work strategy: what separates the squared, controlled from the free, the empowerment*. (Arbetslinjen: Det som skiljer det inrutade, kontrollerade från det fria, från egenmakten).

***Skända arbetslinjen* av Hannes Mannerheim**

The image is basically a brute remake of Sven Otto Littorins painting. The swedish word in the title, “skända”, means desecrate in english. There are also more text in swedish. Two exhortations, “svik tillväxten” (let down the economic growth) and “var oförmögen” (be incapable), and the word “kuken” which is swedish slang for penis.

***Blir du lönsam Litto-vän* by André**

The title is not easy to translate. It consists of the words “will you become profitable” and a play on words with “Littorin” och “lille vän”, which means “little friend” in swedish. The image features a classroom full of pupils and with Sven Otto Littorins painting and a television screen featuring Sven Otto Littorin himself on the wall.

***Arbetslinjen ger frihetslinjen* by “laxsill”**

The image consists of a number of small copies of Sven Otto Littorins painting, formed as a swastika. There are also the words “arbete” (work), “ger” (gives) and “frihet” (freedom), and the logotype of “Nya moderaterna”, the political party of Sven Otto Littorin.

***Analyse this* by anonymous**

The image is a version of the painting “La Mort de Marat” (The Death of Marat) by Jacques-Louis David. The only difference is that Marat is holding a small version of Sven Otto Littorins painting instead of a letter.

THE DISCURSIVE PRACTICE OF THE IMAGES

In Sven Otto Littorins painting the work strategy becomes not just a political strategy but a dividing line (linje is line in swedish) between what is free and what is not. The black line in the middle of the painting is a division between the squares in the colours of the opposition and the sun and the sky which happens to have the same colour as Sven Otto Littorins party “Nya Moderaterna”.

The work strategy, in Sven Otto Littorins version, is not what one would expect a line to

13 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage
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follow or a strategy but a dividing-line, a border between free and unfree.

Words like “free” and “freedom” could be described as “nodal points” according to Laclau and Mouffes theory¹⁴. Sven Otto Littorin tries to organize the discourse by associating the work strategy with freedom.

The other images are not just versions of Littorins painting but opposes it in different ways. Most of them also uses free and freedom, but with different meaning and associations. Three of them are versions of classical political art. Just by combining them with Littorins painting the authors make statements – they are opposing Littorins definition of the work strategy.

“Skända arbetslinjen” by Hannes Mannerheim is a version of Carl Johan de Geers painting “Skända flaggan” (Desecrate the flag) from 1967, which is, just as the title describes, a desecration of the Swedish flag. De Geers painting was confiscated and destroyed by the police. De Geer was convicted by the court of appeal for desecrating the national symbol and for agitation. Mannerheim desecrates Littorins painting the same way de Geer desecrated the Swedish flag and by doing that of course also what the painting symbolizes. Against Littorins “free” and “empowerment” Mannerheim puts “be incapable” and “let down the economic growth”. In my opinion Mannerheim implies that with “freedom” Littorin really means “economic growth”

Andrés image “Blir du lönsam Litto-vän” is also a version of a classic Swedish political painting, “Blir du lönsam, lille vän” (Will you become profitable, my little friend) by Peter Tillberg från 1971. In my opinion, André just like Hannes Mannerheim, implies that Littorin really means something else with the word “free” and that the purpose of the work strategy is to create profit.

André also comments on the ideological function of the discourse of the work strategy by putting Littorins painting in a classroom. According to Louis Althusser¹⁵ school is a “ideological state apparatuses”, in other words one of the most important institutions where the ideology of the state is transmitted. According to Foucault¹⁶ school plays a major role in enforcing discipline.

“Arbetslinjen ger frihetslinjen” by Laxsill uses the notion of freedom in a more direct way than the two previous artists. The word freedom is used both in the title where it implies, however ironically, that freedom is a consequence of the work strategy. The words “arbete ger frihet” is a Swedish translation of “arbeit macht frei” (work will make you free) which was the slogan placed at the entrances to Nazi concentration camps during World War Two. The use of the phrase “arbete ger frihet” as a comment on the work strategy would be absolutely revolting if it was not for the fact that Sven Otto Littorins party colleague and member of the Swedish parliament Margareta Cederfelt used that exact phrase in a praise for the work strategy a few weeks before the election 2010. So Laxsill is not only saying that the work strategy is a lie, that it has nothing to do with freedom. He or she is at the same time also referring to one of the biggest lies in history.

14 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage pp 50-51

15 Althusser, Louis (1976) *Filosofi från en proletär klasståndpunkt* Lund: Bo Cavefors bokförlag pp 109-151

16 Foucault, Michel (1993) *Övervakning och Straff* Lund: Arkiv Förlag

The image could also be a reference to “Godwins Law” that states: “As an online discussion grows longer, the probability of a comparison involving Nazis or Hitler approaches 1.”

The last version of Littorins painting, “Analyse this” by anonymous, is a bit harder to interpret. As mention earlier it is a version of the famous painting “La Mort de Marat” by Jacques-Louis David. The only difference is that Marat is holding a small version of Sven Otto Littorins painting instead of a letter. The letter in the original painting says “Il suffit que je sois bien malheureuse pour avoir droit a votre bienveillance” or in English, “I am just too unhappy to deserve your kindness”. In this image the letter is replaced by a small version of Littorins painting. Jean-Paul Marat was a key figure in the french revolution. He was murdered by Charlotte Corday who blamed Marat for a massacre. Corday said that “I killed one man to save 100,000”. My interpretation of this image is that anonymous is saying that the work strategy is the quite opposite of “freedom”, namely death. It is a murder of any progressive spirit and also the sacrifice of a few for the tax benefits of the many.

There is a high level of interdiscursivity in the versions of Littorins painting. You could even talk about a “manifest intertextuality”¹⁷. They all have obvious references. To the french revolution, to historical lies and in two cases to subversive art. A high level of interdiscursivity is associated with change¹⁸. And they all oppose the strategy of the work strategy.

Sven Otto Littorins painting has a much lower level of interdiscursivity. The only obvious references are the colours of the political parties in the swedish parliament. A low level of interdiscursivity signal the reproduction of established order¹⁹. Littorin not only signals established order, he was in fact the established order when he painted “Arbetslinjen”.

But it is not Littorin or the swedish government who are agents in Littorins painting. In fact, there are no agency in the painting at all. In terms of transitivity, the work strategy is presented as some kind of natural phenomenon, a border you have to cross to become free. The work strategy just happened without any responsible agent. This is in my opinion the most ironic feature of the painting, since Sven Otto Littorin is in fact highly responsible for the work strategy. All the agency in the painting is instead laid on someone or something that is not in the picture. Someone else has to cross. In my reading of the painting, that something are the working class of Sweden.

In Mannerheims image he exhorts us to be the agents. He wants us to be incapable and to let down the economic growth. The agency lies outside the image, just as in Littorins painting. The difference is that in this case the agent is explicit. It is the viewer of the image. It is a call for, and an active contribution to, social change.

In Andrés image the main agent is the school system. The children are educated in the spirit of the work strategy in order to become profitable. In the back of the classroom Sven Otto Littorin is watching. Contrary to his own painting, Littorin has an agency in

17 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage p 73

18 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage p 82

19 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage p 83

Andrés image.

In laxsills image the agent is Sven Otto Littorins party, Nya Moderaterna. There is also a kind of a guilt-by-association with another agent, namely the Nazi government of Germany during world war two. This association, however, is not done by laxsill but by a party colleague of Littorin. Unintentionally, one could hope.

In the version of Marats painting by anonymous the agent is also outside the image. But anonymous provides us with a clue. Like in a detective novel the victim of a murder holds a key to the solution. The key is a small copy of Littorins painting. Someone, or something if you interpret it metaphorically, has been murdered and the murderer is the work strategy.

In all of the versions of "Arbetslinjen" there is a distinct agents. There is also a clear connection between the discursive and social practice whereas Littorins own painting just presents the work strategy as a fact or a natural phenomenon. In terms of modality Littorins presents the work strategy a fact, an objective modality. According to Jørgensen and Philips this is one way to reinforce authority²⁰.

The versions uses subjective modalities instead. They are saying that the work strategy has not just happened. It is not a natural phenomenon. It has responsible agents and are itself an agent.

THE SOCIAL PRACTICE

The work strategy is of course more than a painting. In my opinion it is also more than a discourse. It is social reality for the working class of Sweden. It is an expression of power and a tool of discipline. Since the election 2006 the work strategy has been perhaps the most noticeable agenda of the Swedish government.

Like Sven Otto Littorin the Swedish government wants to associate the work strategy with freedom. And it has meant freedom for some people if you by freedom mean for example lower taxes, lower wages and a low rate of inflation. But it has also meant that terminal ill people is forced to work and that unemployed is forced work to get their unemployment insurance. Some people have even committed suicide as a consequence of the politics of the work strategy.

The lack of agents in Littorins painting is a good metaphor for the social practice of the work strategy, where structural problems of unemployment is regarded and treated like individual problems. Unemployed is forced to take personal responsibility for unemployment.

This is, in my opinion, the way ideology in bourgeois societies work. Structural problems are presented as individual problems that demands individual solutions. If someone is unemployed there is something wrong with the individual. Wrong education, laziness, wrong attitude et cetera. Littorin is, intentionally or not, reinforcing that ideology and thereby also the power relations in Swedish society.

The work strategy, the idea that everyone should work as much as possible is presented

20 Jørgensen, Marianne and Philips, Louise (2002) *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method* London: Sage
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as something natural. If we are to believe Max Weber²¹ this goes back to calvinist work ethics and ideas that influenced all protestant societies. There are no established opposition against the work strategy. Although the swedish society has changed a lot over the last hundred years, especially in terms of development and productivity, we still have the eight hour work day which happen to be approximately as old as the work strategy.

CONCLUSION

The discourse concerning the work strategy is a struggle over the meaning of the word "freedom". Littorin tries to make a connection between the work strategy and freedom and the other images tries to reveal it as hypocrisy.

The discursive effort of Littorin is a strengthening of unequal power relations while the versions of his painting opposes the power relations and, at least in some case, calls for social change.

The ideological dimension of the work strategy, the meaning in the service of power, is that the work strategy is a natural phenomenon without any responsible agent. The work strategy is freedom and it is up to each and every individual to reach that freedom.

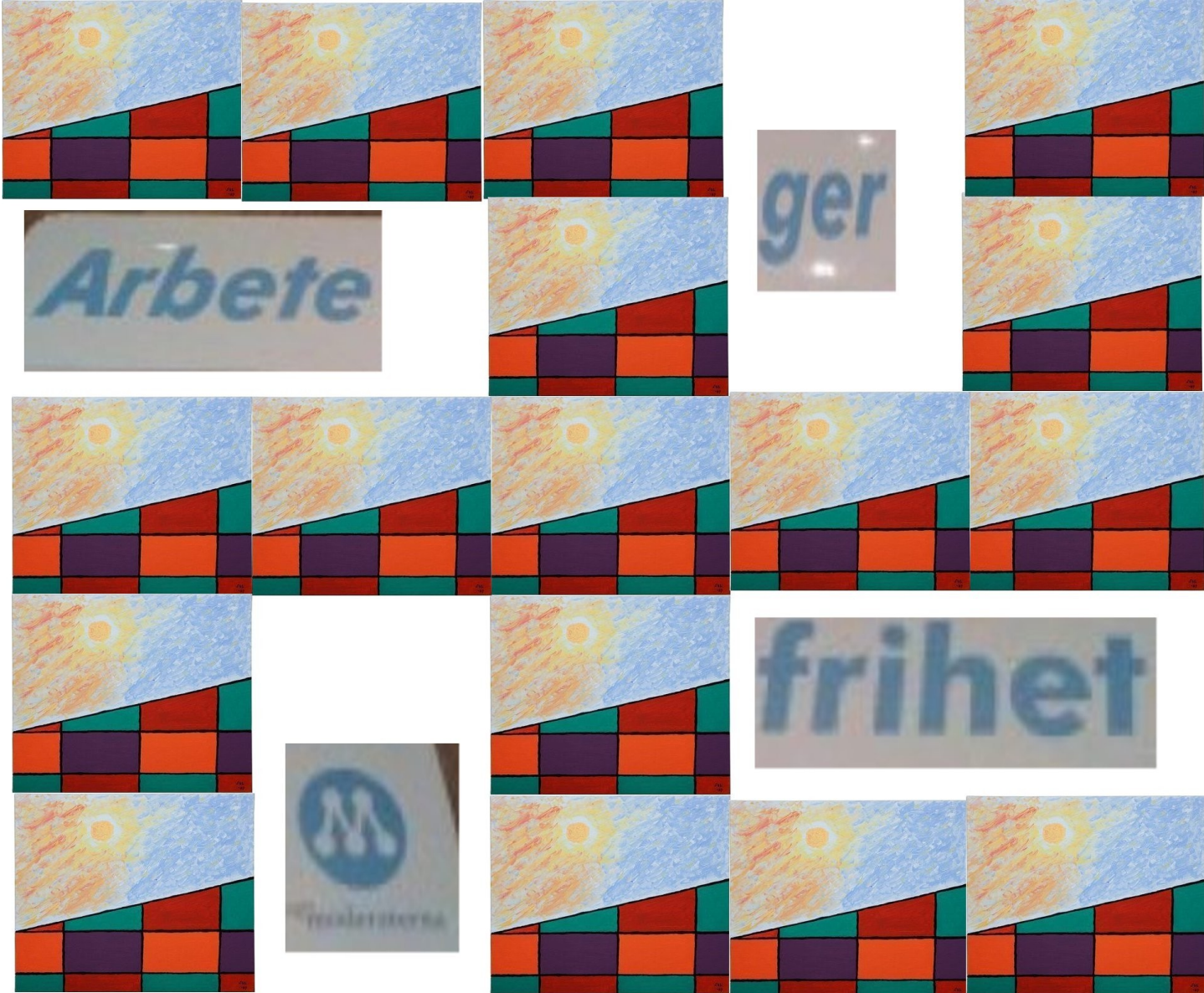
21 Weber, Max (1978) *Den protestantiska etiken och kapitalismens anda* Lund: Argos



“Skända arbetslinjen” av Hannes Mannerheim



“Bli du lönsam Litto-vän” av André



“Arbetslinjen ger frihetslinjen” av laxsill



“Analyse this” av anonym

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