LUND UNIVERSITY

Klas Östergren. Den intellektuelle som åskådare

Hetzler, Antoinette

Published in:
Sociologi genom litteratur - skönlitteraturens möjligheter och samhällsvetenskapens begränsningar

2015

Link to publication

Citation for published version (APA):
Hetzler, A. (2015). Klas Östergren. Den intellektuelle som åskådare. I C. Edling, & J. Rydgren (Red.), *Sociologi genom litteratur - skönlitteraturens möjligheter och samhällsvetenskapens begränsningar* (s. 323-330). Arkiv.

Total number of authors:
1

General rights
Unless other specific re-use rights are stated the following general rights apply:
Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.
• Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
• You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
• You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

Read more about Creative commons licenses: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Take down policy
If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

“Free-floating Intelligentsia” - Klas Östergren and Karl Mannheim”

Christofer R Edling & Jens Rydgren (Red) *Sociologi genom litteratur*, “Klas Östergren, Den intellektuelle som åskådare.” (Kapitlet är en översättning från engelskan).

English version, September 6, 2013

Antoinette Hetzler

Klas Östergren is not only the author of *Gentlemen*[i] but also a leading character in the book, using his own identity and voice in telling the story of the Morgan brothers, Henry and Leo. Östergren’s voice allows him to take over the perspective of not only the two brothers but also their grandfather, their friends, their childhood.

What makes this voice so appealing, so recognizable yet also so tedious if not, in fact, questionable? As a sociologist when I read *Gentlemen*, Östergren’s voice in the book rapidly became associated with Karl Manheim’s concept of the free-floating intelligentsia.[ii] Östergren uses the tension between distance and closeness, integrating different perspectives, to present him as being able to be both a distant observer, the watchman describing events from the outside, and also the insider with access to the closeness necessary to feel empathy and understanding of particular events as lived experience. Yet the creation of a dialectic by Östergren in *Gentlemen* between subject and object, essence and appearance, particular and universal is done without a critical distance to just himself in the role he assigns himself as a ”free-floating intellectual.”

Mannheim’s analysis of the intellectual was incorporated into his desire to create the role of the sociologist as an intellectual. The sociologist was seen as having the ability given to him in his studies to synthesize different perspectives, and thus to reach a better conception of truth. The intellectual, in Mannheim’s explanation of political sociology, lies in his capacity to reach the fullest possible synthesis of the tendencies of an epoch.[iii]Mannheim was not alone in trying to describe the image of the intellectual as the detached observer in the beginning of the twentieth century when, as the sociologist Troy Duster explained it, colonialism, world war, sharply competing ideologies of fascism, communism and other challenges to Western hegemony were all in play. Antonio Gramsci (*The Prison Notebooks*) writing about the same time as Karl Mannheim meant that it was the connectedness to social transformation that was an ideal setting for what Gramsci would term the “organic intellectual.”[iv]

Östergren in *Gentlemen* tries to capture the tendencies of the 1970s as Sweden grows out of both the golden age of the welfare state and the Saltsjöbaden consensus between capital and labor, to an unknown future where traditional political solutions are uncertain. Östergren uses 1979, the year designated as the International Year of the Child and the year of an important national election as both the present and the

backdrop to tie together an epoch. Östergren, Henry and Leo are all variations of Karl Mannheim's free-floating intellectuals. Even if times surrounding them spoke of a "social transformation," they were not connected to the "social transformation." Leo and Klas Östergren do participate in a demonstration and Leo's taxi drive to the mental institution is interrupted by a first of May demonstration. Vietnam is also present as background in the novel, almost as mere coincident of history.

The novel *Gentlemen* begins with a reflection from Klas Östergren a rainy spring night 1979. He is sitting alone in an imposing apartment he describes as dismal (luguber) and looks like a museum over old ideals, or perhaps disappearing chivalry. The brothers that lived in the apartment have hurriedly left and he has no idea where they have gone. He has barricaded the door, has a head sore and unknown enemies out for him. But Östergren tells the reader that he is not creating a portrait of his enemies, a description of evil but a portrait of his friends, a description of what is good and its possibilities. He is uncertain though because he, after being the victim of violence and severely beaten almost to death, has begun to think that goodness has no possibilities. He decides that the least he can do is raise a temple to the Morgan brothers wherever they might be. The result is *Gentlemen* (1980).

Östergren creates the Morgan brothers for us. He describes his chance meeting with Henry, the older of the Morgan brothers, and how he came to move into the apartment. Henry takes to Klas Östergren and invites him to share the apartment because Klas reminds him of his brother, Leo. The events of eight or nine months that he knew Henry and almost six months he knew Leo are unfolded at the beginning (Stockholm, fall 1978) and at the end of the book (Stockholm, winter 1979). The majority of the book is in varying chapters between the beginning and the end, first mostly recounting the life of Henry and with time and the progression of the book also the life experiences of Leo.

Leo the younger brother had always rejected monetary gain and as a child never saved money. He never nourished dreams of fame and riches. Leo, according to Östergren, "was out for truth at any price." Henry was a notorious liar. He salted his stories with fantasies that belong to another world and another time. Östergren speculates at the end of *Gentlemen* that both brothers were clearly anachronisms. In present time, there simple was no space for them.

Henry and Leo's father changed his name from the aristocratic family name of Morganstjärna till Morgan. There is no "morning star" in *Gentlemen*. There is only "tomorrow." The name change was a necessity according to Henry. His father was a jazz pianist and the name "morning star" was not entirely appropriate so it became a more American "Morgan," much to the dismay of Henry's grandmother who apparently dies soon after the name change and her bedroom quickly is changed by her husband into a billiard room. This is the only explanation Östergren provides the reader for leaving only Mr. Morganstjärna, and the billiard room as a link back two generations to an

aristocratic perspective which includes the introduction of the BBB society – *Berest, Beläst, Belevad* (Well-Traveled, Well-Educated, Well-Lived). Not only is the possibility of perspective shifts for a free-floating intellectual early introduced to and by Östergren in *Gentlemen* but so also is the absence or minimization of women. For example, the symbol for unconscientious power in the book, Wilhelm Sterner, is introduced at a golf country club party with mention of Sterner being accompanied by a "Chinese, or whatever she is." And after careful analysis of Östergren she is described as possibly having been a "real 'looker'," when she was younger but now at middle age, she need not be sorry for one day of the passing of time. "I could have been bewitched by her if I had 30 minutes with her, but I didn't get the time. Not this time."

Place is established early on in *Gentlemen*. Sweden and Stockholm are given but the particular is a specific apartment in South Stockholm. Henry inherits the apartment after the death of his grandfather (Morganstjärna) and the apartment, museum, is taken over with all the artifacts of a distant, gentlemen like life. And as Östergren is ensconced in the room containing Görings bed and working on commission to rewrite Strindberg's *Red Room* in the library, repeated evenings are enjoyed in the living room beside the open fire place framed by the two statues, truth and falseness. Henry assures Östergren that night is a constant possibility in the apartment, all one needs do is draw the curtains. Darkness in the apartment is finally questioned at the end of the novel by Maud ("Chinese, or whatever she is) as being dark and depressing and Maud wonders if Östergren thinks the country is in war. Östergren responds as he was told in the beginning of *Gentlemen*, "night is a constant possibility in this apartment," only to hear from Maud that it is summer outside as she opens the drapes. In daylight, Östergren sees the apartment for what it is, dirty and unkempt.

Is Östergren buried inside the memories and experiences of the Morgan brothers, a believable observer/participant? Is his story captivating? Is he truly a Mannheimian "free floating intellectual" piecing together different perspectives of truth as he weaves together what looks like coincidences in the life of the Morgan brothers?

When Leo discovers the "truth" behind the disappearance thirty years earlier of a friend's father and is elated at the possibility of finding and revealing "truth," connected to murder and the involvement of one of Sweden's most renown industries in illegal manufacturing and selling of weapons, he faces the fact that what he had uncovered as "sensational truth" had already been known. Moreover, because of important political and economical interests, the "truth" had to remain concealed to preserve the status quo. Leo was manipulated and his work would not be used to reveal the truth or to vindicate his friend or any other noble reason. In fact, Leo was told that his written report would soon be in the hands of the person paying for the information. Nothing was free and the discovery of "truth" had a price. Eventually Leo takes the money offered him for his report but closes himself off in the apartment museum. Henry returns from a trip some days later to find a smelly apartment, Leo in bed in a catatonic state and the

money covered in excrement spewed about the apartment. Leo is committed to a mental institution.

Is this a reference to Jan Guillou and Peter Bratt's scoop of the 1970s? Perhaps, and thus light is shone on the role of political power in taking away the aura of "truth" and providing instead an explanation that there is always another more important "truth" that has been or would be violated by an eventual revelation. Today it is Bradley/Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden revealing truth after truth only to hear a wide collective world yawning accompanied by a weak appellation to freedom of the press. Then again, Leo was warned. The price he was required to pay for discovering "truth," was silence.

It is possible to say that *Gentlemen* has aged. Both consciousness and reflection in everyday life today has developed into a political cynicism. This makes Leo's experiences or at least his reaction for the reader almost mundane. Well, is "truth" non-important or rather non-existent for today's sociologist or intelligentsia? And has our modern concept of individual identity moved from the simple idea of the subject as a fixed point in cognition, unchangeable. Did Klas Östergren fall into the same trap that Theodor Adorno accused Karl Mannheim as falling into? That is, was all observable change of self treated only as related to movement of the object?[v]That is, what is an individual? Are we easily manipulated by immediate happenings that occur around us? Henry becomes decisive when he realizes that someone has acted against Leo. "Enough is enough." But Östergren does nothing, or almost nothing. He documents the Morgan brothers' story. Is Östergren the last of the three free-floating intellectuals in the novel as he moves the story along and by showing that if involvement takes over distance one is actually in danger of physical or mental death. Is this the fate of a true "free-floating intellectual?"

Again, Karl Mannheim is concerned with the problem of involvement and detachment, without involvement you never really know what you are describing. Yet Mannheim means that his intellectual is required to distance himself from their original affiliations and to develop an identity of their own. In *Ideology and Utopia,* Mannheim points out three ways of gaining a detached perspective: most common is of course social mobility when one leaves class roots and sees it in another perspective. The intellectual has distance by being isolated in studies as well and books provide a type of remoteness from "real" life. Mannheim also points out that a certain degree of financial independence and a amount of leisure time can also be a "source of estrangement from reality" for it conceals the frictions and tensions of life and invites a sublimated an internalized perception of things."[vi]

Mannheims' critics within German critical theory maintained, "Truth is objective, not plausible."[vii] Primarily, social class was the determining variable in subjective

experience for the Frankfurt's school research during the thirties. Adorno explicitly rejected Mannheims idea of a free-floating intelligensia (*freischwebende* for Adorno). Adorno argued instead that the uniqueness of the individual particularism spoke to a non-identity. That is, if an individual is determined by historical circumstances, just his/her particularity makes him unique and irreplaceable. This uniqueness is in a constant state of change and is in a dialectic process of social praxis. Adorna had as his criterion for judging the correctness of consciousness the individual subject's *nonidentity* with the world.[viii]What happens influences your understandings. Mannheim meant instead that reflection, the ability to take the perspective of others is not universal but is a matter of learning. Being able to see and understand the perspectives of many in different situations enables a probable synthesis.

So what is it? The idea of Theodor Adorno's concept of a "nonidentity" is attractive. In a way it makes everyone a "free-floating intelligentsia," if even for a passing moment. Everyone is reflexive. But Mannheim approaches truth by dealing with problems of the sociology of knowledge. Marxism becomes just one more ideology because all knowledge is rooted in a social context. Thus Mannheim could be seemed to be undermining the distinction between true and false consciousness.[ix] Max Horkheimer calls Mannheim's view of synthesis of different perspectives for "relationism," defined as an attempt to salvage objective truth by arguing that all partial truths were perspectives on the whole.

It should be pointed out that Mannheim developed the concept of total, general ideology with two variations. One is the notion of value-free observation that is used in historical research. This does not lead to relativism but to what Mannheim terms as a relational approach that seeks to understand ideas in terms of their historical location and sociological bearers.[x] The other variation of the total, general concept of ideology is *valuing* and *dynamic* and useful as a sociological diagnosis of the present. It is the second variation that is of most important for Karl Mannheim. He writes, according to Abromeit, that history must be understood as a meaningful totality in which man gradually reveals his essence. History is not simply a series of random coincidences but is a meaningful process in which man's essence is gradually revealed. Mannheim believed that man had become transcendentally homeless in the modern world and instead of simply choosing an appropriate ideology, the sociologist of knowledge must look at all of them as expressions of particular social groups. But for Mannheim it was possible to find a criterion to judge the truth content of ideologies. That is whether it is adequate to the current stage of society that it attempts to explain.

Östergren is occupied with the concept of "truth" in his tale of the Morgan brothers. The criticism of Mannheim by the scholars of the Frankfurt school included also that Mannheim with his free-floating intellectuals looked at both the subject and the object as stationary. Östergren in the last section of *Gentlemen,* winter 1979, sits and rests his eyes on the two parian figures from Gustafsbergs Porcelin Factory that flanked the open

fire place He tells the reader, “I did not know on which I should focus my attention, ‘Liar’ or ‘Truth.’ One was beautiful, the other was strange if nothing else.” For Critical theory, there was no ”objective” reality that individual consciousness partially reflected.

Östergren describes in the last pages of Gentlemen as part of a high price he paid for moving into the Hornsgatan apartment, museum: strange obsessive thoughts, an acquired tick under his eye and a type of document, way over 600 typewritten pages where he tried to give the brothers Morgan right (upprättelse) and create a monument of Truth. He then writes that it had become a bomb and that making it public was probably the same as committing a suicide in front of an open curtain.

…

The Frankfurt School did not accept Karl Mannheims conception of the ”free-floating intelligentsia. Martin Jay means that for Adorno and Horkheimer the status of an ”outsider” was rooted in the recognition that such a position was in some way a precondition for the maintenance of a truly critical posture in its theoretical work. However, Jay mentions that by 1951 Theodore Adorno had ruled out the possibility of any collectivity being on the side of truth and located the residue of progressive social forces in the critical individual. In fact, although the Frankfurt School scorned Mannheim’s ideas about free-floating intellectuals, members of the school, according to Jay, ”came increasingly to resemble his model.”[xi]

Abromeit, John (2011). *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Adorno, Teodor (1947?). “Uber Mannheims Wissenssoziologie,” Frankfut am Main, Adorno Estate.
Buck-Morss, Susan (1977). *The Origins of the Negative Dialectice.* Sussex: The Harvest Press Ltd.
Gramsci, Antonio (1971). *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. International Publishers
Jay, Martin (1973), *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-50.* London: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd.
Mannheim, Karl (1954).*Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Socoiology of Knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.
Östergren, Klas (1980). *Gentlemen.* Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag.

[i] 1980. Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag.

[ii] Mannheim, Karl (1954, [1929]), *Ideology and utopia. An introduction to the sociology of knowledge*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

[iii] Ibid., s.146

[iv] 2007 (1947), Stockholm:Ruin.

[v] Adorno, Theodor (1953) "Über Mannheims Wissensoziologie" i *Aufklärung*, vol. 2, s.4, citerad i Buck-Morss, Susan (1977), *The origins of negative dialectics,* Sussex: The Harvest Press, s. 84.

[vi] Mannheim 1954. S. 160.

[vii] Buck-Morss 1977, s. 85.

[viii] Ibid., s. 84.

[ix] Jay, Martin (1973), *The dialectical imagination. A history of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of social research 1923-50*. London: Heinemann Educational Books, s.63.

[x] Abromeit, John (2011). *Max Horkheimer and the foundations of the Frankfurt School.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, s. 146.

[xi] Jay 1973; s. 291.