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The Elusive ‘Docent Grade’: Evaluative Cultures in and Beyond the Swedish Humanities (1876–1969)

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Abstract

In the late nineteenth and for much of the twentieth century, an academic career in Sweden was highly dependent on what grade a scholar’s doctoral dissertation was awarded. Unless receiving a so-called “docent grade”, basically declaring the scholar eligible for seeking the title of docent (associate professor), the prospects of maintaining an academic career were bleak. Throughout the period, this gate-keeping practice provoked controversy, at times extending beyond closed faculty board rooms into public arenas such as periodicals and newspapers. Moreover, conflicts over grades could expose tensions between opposing intellectual traditions, regional cultures of knowledge, and political camps. This article explores the development of the combined doctor/docent assessment and investigates instances when customary practice was challenged, for instance as female docents or applicants with foreign credentials entered the system. By tracing the long history of the docent grade and the debates it spurred, the article shows that the uncodified grading of dissertations was indeed an effective gate-keeping mechanism, but that the evaluative practice was also possible to circumvent and challenge. The article highlights early and alternative forms of peer evaluation in the humanities with particular focus on the assessment of early career academics, arguing that historical perspectives enrich ongoing discussions on evaluative practices in academia, and also open up for new ways to think about how peer review can be organised in years to come.

Keyword doctor/docent assessment · evaluative culture · Swedish academia · boundary work · history of humanities

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Prologue

In the 1928 novel *Jonas och draken* [Jonas and the Dragon], a *Bildungsroman* by acclaimed Swedish author Sigfrid Siwertz, we follow philosopher Jonas von Dankvart on his journey toward a doctoral degree at Uppsala University. The gifted student is well on his way to secure a respected position in society, marrying the academic world with the bourgeoisie sphere. But the promising career is seemingly cut short in an instant when his doctoral dissertation fails to receive a good enough grade (Siwertz 1928: 84). Thankfully, at his public *disputatio*, Jonas manages to mount an excellent defense in the face of heavy criticism by one of the examiners, receiving the best possible grade on the oral part of the exam, in effect saving his career. Taken together, the two grades were deemed enough to qualify him for the title of *docent* (associate professor) at the university, thus passing the first critical threshold of Swedish academia.

This fictional account illustrates a special feature of the Swedish academic system and its crucial role as an evaluative practice (Lamont 2012: 211–214). Following the formalization of the PhD in 1870, an academic career in Sweden was largely dependent on which grade a doctoral dissertation was awarded by the faculty. Although the dissertation has traditionally played a key role for future careers in the humanities in many countries, the stakes were arguably particularly high in Sweden, and anchored to a closed off and remarkably uncoded evaluative moment that followed upon the public defence. Unless receiving what colloquially came to be referred to as a “docent grade” [*docentbetyg*], signaling eligibility for the title of docent, the prospects of pursuing an academic career were bleak.¹ As we will show in this article, however, although the evaluative process depended on tacit mutual understanding rather than formal guidelines, there were frequent clashes over what constituted a good enough dissertation and even what grade constituted a “docent grade”. Moreover, the example in the novel highlights how the rite of passage was not only part of the internal workings of the university but became a recognizable motif in the public sphere as well. As such, it also came to influence and challenge the supposedly internal evaluation processes of academia.

Siwertz’s narrative was loosely based on the life of philosopher, literary critic, and public intellectual John Landquist (1881–1974), who got his PhD in Uppsala in 1908 and eventually ended up as professor of pedagogy and psychology at Lund University in 1936.² In reality, Landquist’s academic path was even more winding than that of his fictional counterpart. Following a five-hour long defense, he was awarded a lower grade on his doctoral dissertation than the hero of the novel (Nils-son 2009a: 53–55). Landquist received a Ba on the grading scale (A-a-AB-Ba-B), translated over time from the Latin terminology commonly associated with dissertations in Europe – ranging from *laudatur* to *approbatur* (Chang 2021; Lindberg 2022). Failing to reach a high enough grade excluded Landquist from an academic career (Frängsmyr 2010: 41). Or so it would seem. As indicated by Landquist’s long journey to a professorship, it was still possible to get around the gatekeeping practice of doc-

¹ All translations of quotations from Swedish into English are done by the authors.

² Siwertz was in fact one of the official opponents at Landquist’s public defence (Landquist 1966: 119).

tor/docent assessment, although it typically required plenty of patience, significant accumulation of alternative (in this case cultural) capital, and appeals to authorities beyond the faculty board.

While the so-called docent grade is still commonly referenced in historiographical descriptions, closer investigation reveals it to be something of a “black box”. Few seem to have asked what a docent grade actually meant, how it was awarded in practice, and which broader evaluative norms it entailed. This means that historiographical narratives are not always reliable as testimonies over the evaluation practices connected to the docent grade. Formally there was no such thing, but as we will show, despite (or perhaps because) of its uncoded nature, the equivocal “docent grade” not only had drastic individual but also lasting consequences for the academic landscape at large up until a complete reorganisation of the doctoral education in 1969. This reform significantly limited the stakes by abandoning grading other than “pass” or “fail” (e.g. SOU 1966:67; Prop. 1969:31). In the period prior to that change, however, recurring disputes regarding the career-defining peer evaluation of dissertations tended to highlight principal issues concerning epistemic virtues and vices as well as the organisation of the academic system (e.g. van Dongen & Paul 2017).

Academic evaluations are situated practices that typically differ in significant ways between national university systems. In general terms, one can make a useful distinction between evaluative cultures that use either binary or more differentiated grading practices when awarding doctoral degrees. In many countries, the faculty primarily had to decide whether to accept a doctoral candidate or not, which in itself could imply complicated and lengthy negotiations of academic norms (e.g., Larsen 2016: 102–134). In other countries, however, with a formalised differentiated grading scale, the stakes were slightly different. Germany for instance, still practices such a system, where especially the highest grade, *summa cum laude*, tends to be required for a future academic career (de Vogel 2022). The practice in France was, up until recent years, also reminiscent of the older Swedish one, as the dissertation distinction *très honorable* tended to serve as the basic qualifying criterium for a future career in academia (Musselin 2010: 103–104). In this regard, the Swedish history of doctoral evaluation offers an interesting case in point, as the differentiated grading system that once played such an important part was abandoned over night already in 1969.

While previous historical research has focused on expert evaluations of professorships (e.g. Clark 2006; Dalberg 2018; Gunneriusson 2002; Hamann 2019; Hammarfelt 2022; Larsson 2010; Nilsson 2009b), less is known about the history of evaluative practices concerning early career academics. Looking beyond historical studies, the last couple of decades have indeed seen a mounting interest in the gate-keeping mechanisms and assessment criteria relevant to this category of academic staff, with several studies also about the Nordic context (e.g. Aittola 2008; Elmgren, Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson 2024; Ganzua & Salö 2023; Hammarfelt et al 2024; Kyvik & Thune 2015; Nästesjö 2024). However, these studies tend to leave out important historical contexts, such as the drastic 1969 reform in Sweden as well as earlier academic practices. Our study therefore brings light to a markedly different evaluative culture in the past.

Purpose and Outline

The purpose of this article is to analyse the peer evaluation of early career academics in the humanities centered around the grading of doctoral dissertations and subsequent assessments related to awarding the title of docent. By illuminating negotiations and conflicts on various arenas (from the faculty board room to public debates) and how they related to a broader national evaluative culture, our study contributes historical perspectives to ongoing discussions on evaluative practices in the humanities, which in turn may open up for new ways to approach peer review.

In the first part of the article, we review the historical development of the docentship and its evaluative practices, tracing how the seemingly ubiquitous notion of a “docent grade” was established as a crucial gate-keeping mechanism. We aim to show that these practices were part of tacit and preconceived notions of quality that remained unarticulated for much of the period, unlike today, where explicit guidelines of both what is expected from a docent application and how to assess them are commonplace. In the second part, we present a number of case studies that saw this tacit culture being challenged, thereby demonstrating idiosyncrasies in how the evaluations were performed. Collectively, these cases illustrate that a common understanding of the evaluative framework was frequently lacking, that the grading scale itself shifted, and finally that outside influence could affect the awarding of a grade. Through these challenges to the notion of a stable docent grade, we are able to raise questions about the ostensibly unique, although socially embedded and negotiated, collegial evaluative practices of academia and the characteristics of the national evaluative culture at large (Lamont 2009). Our main argument is that the tacit and uncodified protocols of evaluation meant that the practice of grading dissertations was an effective gate-keeping mechanism, yet one that could also be circumvented and challenged on arenas outside of the university. In a sense, it was both a potent and fragile form of evaluation, a duality that can, we believe, fruitfully carry over to other historical and geographical contexts.

In order to target the tacit protocols of evaluation, the article covers a range of specific empirical examples drawn from a number of disciplines in the humanities, such as history, philosophy, and semitic languages. The selection of examples is based on their controversial character, as they all challenged conventional practices and generated fierce debates. This gives us the opportunity to tease out and fixate the peer evaluation taking place, analysing special instances when conventional practices were openly challenged and put to the test. At such moments of controversy (see Brante, Fuller & Lynch 1993), we argue, instable boundaries and the fundamental weaknesses of the academic system become visible, as each controversy produced distinct historical source material that illuminates an otherwise largely oral evaluative culture.

It is well-known that academic life is characterised by a range of symbolic boundaries (Gieryn 1999; Lamont & Molnár 2022; Lamont, Pendergrass & Pachucki 2015; Wisselgren 2022); the doctoral degree indeed formed one of the most important lines of demarcation (Elmgren, Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson 2024: 434). A main point we want to make, however, is that the evaluation practice extended beyond the control of the universities. In the humanities in particular, public defenses of doctoral dissertations – the *disputatio* (e.g. Friedenthal, Marti & Seidel 2021) – frequently turned

out to be lengthy, spectacular, and at times emotionally charged contests, attracting interest in the media and popular culture. On various (more or less) public arenas (see Östling 2020; van Miert 2019: 228–230), assessments of doctoral dissertations and possible docent competence typically exposed tensions between opposing academic traditions or disciplines.

Moreover, we want to bring attention to a feature that we argue made the Swedish evaluative culture special. Since universities were part of the broader public administration, academic career paths and evaluations in this national context were in a sense uniquely transparent. For one thing, the Swedish system offered an almost unlimited right to appeal against formal faculty decisions. This, in turn, generated a vast source material in the form of complaint letters and other public documents that tend to expose major dividing lines of the academic landscape (Nybom 1997: 162–164; Strang 2013: 18). As an institution, the legitimacy of universities depended on public accountability. By being integrated into the general public administration, the system imposed no principal cap on who could be counted upon, or who could intervene, as a potential stakeholder. This relative heterogeneity among the actors is important to highlight, as current discussions on research quality and evaluations still often tend to assume that certain academic peers are the only relevant stakeholders (Franssen 2022).

Several of the cases we cover have previously been narrated in various contexts; analysed collectively, however, they enable us to gauge the docent grade and its evaluative function in a new light.³ Combining formal documents such as faculty protocols and governmental public inquiries with pamphlets published as open letters of complaint and public debates in journals and newspapers, our study provides both a multifaceted view of a number of core elements of Swedish academia as well as unique insight into the opaque gatekeeping mechanisms that decided the fate of aspiring academics.

The Development of the Docent Institution

In order to pinpoint what was at stake in the evaluations of early career academics prior to 1969 it is necessary to understand the history of the academic title known as *docent*. Even if there are similarities with *tutor* and *Privatdozent*, in England and Germany respectively, (Busch 1959; Engel 1983) the Swedish “docentship” [*docentur*] developed in singular fashion from the nineteenth century onward, not least by being more thoroughly integrated into the public state apparatus and thus becoming part of intense discussions about university reform in the latter decades of the century.

Although the origins of the custom of appointing docents in academia can be traced far back in the history of universities, as a title signaling the right to teach (*venia docendi*), the formal position of the Swedish docent was created in the eigh-

³ A large part of the empirical cases were identified via searches in digitized databases of newspapers and scholarly publications (via the National Library of Sweden) as well as through a prosopographic database of docents in the humanities at Swedish universities compiled within the project “The Humanist Diaspora: Migration of Humanists and the Circulation of Knowledge in Swedish Society 1876–1926”, funded by the Crafoord Foundation (20220594).

teenth century. From the start, the status of the title was elusive, equated neither with formal rights nor obligations. Originally, professors would often recruit docents to help them with teaching. Appointments could, it seems, be quite arbitrary and nepotistic (Annerstedt 1914: 108; Blomqvist 1994). Adhering to the “one–professor–per–institute principle”, the organisation and development of academic careers was limited according to the (small) number of chair professors at Swedish universities. New positions on that level only became available upon retirements or the creation of new disciplines, which, as remarked by Christine Musselin with regard to the similar German system, made the managing of positions “a rather inflexible affair and had painful effects on careers” (Musselin 2010: 22).

Over time, however, the appointment of docents became more strongly tied to a specific evaluation following the *disputatio*, challenging the view of docents as mere teaching assistants to the professors (*Förslag och betänkanden* 1901: 138–139). This development was fueled by the first thorough reform of Swedish universities since the seventeenth century, implemented via new statutes in 1852 (Östh Gustafsson 2023). Rather than simply responding to a thesis written by the person in charge of the proceedings (*praeses*), which had developed into a custom over time (Chang 2004; Lindberg 2022: 209; Hammar 2024: 806–807; Odén 1991a: 194), the new regulations formally decreed that doctoral candidates should author their dissertations themselves. The general strengthening of doctoral training in the second half of the nineteenth century, primarily based on influences from German universities (Odén 1991b: 147), can be seen as having formed a crucial prerequisite for the renewed status of docents. Moreover, the doctoral degree replaced the previous master degree as the final educational step at the Swedish faculties of philosophy, thus following the general pattern of how the German doctor of philosophy degree was imported into other Western systems of higher education (Clark 2006: 183–184).

The desire to have a constant base of younger scholars from which to recruit professors formed a robust logic of the docent institution. From the perspective of the university, it made sense to have a mobile group of scholars who not only helped out with teaching chores, but who in a few years managed to amass enough merits to rise in the university ranks. Docents who failed to live up to these expectations, or for whom a position did not open up, would, ideally, leave academia with a better chance of getting employed primarily at secondary schools, where the doctoral grade was also an important criterium in the recruitment processes.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the role and status of docents in Swedish higher education was debated, but over time increasingly solidified (Blomqvist 1992; 1993). A crucial step in this regard was the introduction in the early 1850s of docent stipends, which could be held for up to six years. These stipends, which were typically fewer than the number of disciplines and chair professors, and supposed to be awarded with the local need for teachers in mind, added a new competitive element (*Förslag* 1901: 210; *Betänkande och förslag* 1918: 63–93). The stipends, however, also strengthened the autonomy of docents, as they became less dependent on individual professors (Blomqvist 1994). In this context, docents themselves, for instance in the form of societies for “young teachers”, were instrumental in pushing issues revolving around their obligations, the size of the stipends, and most pressingly, their place on the academic career ladder. A proposal around the turn of the century admit-

ted that without docents, the universities would not be able to live up to “increasing demands of a more intense and diverse education” and, furthermore, that their contribution to the amount of research conducted had been significant (*Förslag*1901: 140–141). No wonder then that a central tension revolved around the very rationale of this middle step in the career ladder of academia and its status in relation to the professoriate – displaying an immanent generational conflict characteristic of the academic system. While docents themselves tended to view the title as serving the needs of their career development and prospects, as a title to be earned, ongoing discussions made it clear that this was not how politicians and academic leaders saw it. In their mind, docents were meant to serve the university – as a group from which the most talented could be plucked – not the other way around. In addition, a chief fear was that the risk of frustration within the docent ranks, fueled by increasing competition over the small number of stipends and positions as professor, would poison academia as a whole (*Förslag*1901: 147; Blomqvist 1992: 282).

Similarly, there was a fear of devaluation of the title itself due to an overproduction of docents. Such rhetoric would form a recurring trope in subsequent centuries, as fears of a “docent proletariat” were discussed. The issue was particularly pressing in the humanities. In 1880, for instance, there were 25 professors in the humanities, and no less than 46 docents. At all other faculties the number of docents was in fact smaller than the number of professors (Richardson 1963: 55). This indicates that, due to the particularly fierce competition, the “docent question” was primarily a problem for the humanities.

The Peer Evaluation Process

Following a revision of the university statutes in 1876, and a number of criticised cases of nepotism in the context of academic recruitment, peer evaluation became mandatory for hiring practices at Swedish universities, even if the actual evaluative practices could still differ significantly between these individual institutions.⁴ The regulations of 1876 meant that the power to decide the future prospects of a PhD was concentrated to the local faculties or, as in the case of the humanities, faculty “sections”, making them the primary gatekeepers on site at the universities (Blomqvist 1993: 212–216; Geschwind & Terrell 2011: 81).⁵ The evaluation of the doctoral dissertation and the public defence operated on two levels: first of all, it served to certify that the candidate was accepted as PhD, secondly, it also sought to determine whether he (and, more rarely, she) should be deemed competent enough for a career as docent (and, eventually, professor) at the university. In this way the evaluation resembled the early-modern practice of disputing first for a degree (*pro gradu*) and then, soon after, for a place in the faculty (*pro loco*) (Clark 2006: 204).

⁴ The Swedish academy at this time constituted a limited sphere, based on the two old, full-scale universities of Lund (1666) and Uppsala (1477), two university colleges of Gothenburg (1891) and Stockholm (1878), and a number of specialized institutions.

⁵ In 1876, the traditional faculty of arts/philosophy was split into two “sections” at Swedish universities, one for the natural sciences and one for the humanities.

In order to receive the docent title, the newly appointed doctor first had to apply for it. Formally, the assessment of docents was supposed to take the entire production into account and the applicant was allowed to submit additional works. At the same time, however, the success of the application normally hinged on the strength of the dissertation and the oral defense, and more specifically the grades received. These grades were discussed during a faculty meeting soon after the *disputatio* in question. This collegial meeting formed an evaluative moment where entire careers seemed to hang in the balance. Crystalizing those discussions into a formal grade meant negotiating personal relationships, diverging standards, disciplinary identities, faculty politics, and financial concerns. Ideally, it seems to have been the two highest grades, *laudator* (A) and *cum insigniori laude approbatur* (a), awarded on both the written dissertation and the oral defense, that signaled that one could go on to successfully apply for the docent title. The following grade, *cum laude approbatur* (AB), however, could also open up for negotiations, and was as a result sometimes even characterised as either a strong or a weak *cum laude* in order to distinguish whether a candidate should be regarded as competent for the docent title or not. In fact, assessments over time tended to cluster around this grade with the following one, *non sine laude approbatur* (BA), serving as the fault line (Prop. 1969:31, 23). In essence then, there was neither a formal nor a sacrosanct “docent grade”.

The great majority of docents were, after a separate evaluation by the faculty/section, appointed more or less directly after their public defence, or at least within the first few years. But in effect, the institutionalisation of a “docent grade” undermined the more codified practice of the docent application, signaling eligibility for an academic career beforehand. Yet, the evaluative moment, that is, the negotiations following the doctoral defence, did not adhere to any strict temporal confines; even if the matter normally seems to have been dealt with in a standard procedure lasting over a few weeks, the process could end up as much lengthier and complex in the more controversial cases. The procedure was nonetheless typically settled within a relatively short time span after the graduation, which can be contrasted to the current, *Habilitation*-like practice in Sweden, where career defining assessments tend to take place in a later phase, and early career academics typically become docents c. 4–10 years after their PhDs (Hammarfelt et al 2024: 3, 7).

It should be noted that while the detailed practice of how to consult the grading scale proves elusive and gradually shifted, the general procedure seems to have been more or less straightforward. Although disciplinary expertise was typically consulted and the local chair professor normally proposed the grade, the broader faculty collegium, consisting of professors from various disciplines, was supposed to settle the grade by a vote in plenum. Ostensibly, the assessments hinged on a tacit understanding of what it took to be part of the scholarly community at large and in specific disciplines. This self-understanding was to some extent challenged as the reforms also sought to make the universities part of a more uniform and streamlined public administration, primarily from the 1870s onward – a process which obviously put issues of academic freedom and autonomy under debate (Blomqvist 1992).

In light of this, it is quite telling that in all the debates about the role and status of the docents, almost no ink was spent on the very the key aspect that qualified you for a docentship in the first place – the assessment and grading of the doctoral disserta-

tion. Many of the documents that deal with higher education in general and the docent institution in particular, fail to mention how aspiring docents were to be evaluated or how this practice was connected to the quality of the dissertation. The committee’s analysis of the “docent question” made in 1901, for instance, only mentions in passing that a thesis awarded “a certain grade” had in many instances been enough to earn the author a docentship (149). In 1939, however, a committee returned to the problem of overabundance of docents, zeroing in on the practice of appointing docents based on the grade of the dissertation, matter-of-factly and descriptively stating:

Since the appointment of a docent in most cases is essentially based on the grade of the graduate dissertation, the way in which this grade is awarded is of the utmost importance for the recruitment of docents (26).

And finally, in 1966, a few years before the grading was abandoned, a state report mentioned that there was a particular grade that determined eligibility:

Appointment as docent requires proof of the necessary competence as a scholar and teacher, which in terms of scientific merit has generally been understood as requiring at least a *cum laude* [*Med beröm godkánt*] on the dissertation examination (111).

The vagueness indicated regarding the doctoral grading underlines the need to explore and historicise these evaluative practices more thoroughly, and in the absence of formal guidelines, it is necessary to look at cases where tacit protocols were challenged.

Contested Docent Evaluations

A number of famous cases serve to demonstrate how negotiations over dissertation grades could easily bypass standard protocols in favor of a range of academic and political interests. The most famous individual example of a Swedish academic who failed to achieve a docent grade was scientist Svante Arrhenius. While his dissertation, in retrospect, has been described as truly seminal, it was only awarded the grade of *non sine*. By seeking support from international authorities, Arrhenius however managed to convince the local section in Uppsala to appoint him docent on his way to the Noble prize for chemistry in 1903 (Svedberg 1920).

Similarly notorious was the affair related to Sven Stolpe’s doctoral degree in 1959. Stolpe was a celebrated, but also controversial, public intellectual when he decided to write a dissertation in literary history, which was accordingly perceived as a challenge toward the “ivory tower”. The five-hour public defence in the grand auditorium at Uppsala University gathered 1 200 people and was broadcasted live on Swedish radio and reported on in a large number of magazines. The local section was clearly divided on the question of grading, and discussions on its quality continued in the media, with Stolpe himself participating. He was obviously hoping for a “docent grade”, but the section settled on a “weak” *cum laude* (Gustafsson 2012; Stolpe 1970: 130–156).

A particularly curious instance in the history of docent appointments is Lauritz Weibull, who ranks as one of the most influential historians in twentieth-century Sweden. His career, however, was almost stopped in its tracks (Odén 1975). A grade for the dissertation could only be given by the section, and the section was chaired by his father who was professor of history. When other local academic staff refused to take on his compromised role as examiner, the matter became gridlocked. Weibull instead requested a public defense on his dissertation in 1899, but for the title of docent directly, an assessment which did not demand a grade. The thorny situation was met with resistance from one of the historians at Lund, who recruited two external reviewers to give their views on the dissertation in private correspondence with him and instructed them to still adhere to the usual grading scale. In one of the reviews, Uppsala historian Ludwig Stavenow clearly hesitated between *non sine* and *cum laude*, and admitted that his motivation was subject to the evaluative “praxis” that varied between universities. Even though Stavenow settled on the lower grade, he stated that if the dissertation should be judged as a merit for the title of docent, when taking Weibull’s entire production into account, in his opinion it would suffice (Stavenow to Fahlbeck, May 29, 1899). The case offers an example of how it was, indeed, possible to negotiate one’s way around the gate-keeping function of the docent grade. The examples that follow, however, clearly illustrate how the grade can be seen as part of boundary work that kept academic outsiders or adversaries out.

A Female Docent?

Although most of the aforementioned committee reports regarding the docentship only speak of young men in relation to the docent title, some of the factors inherent in the docent issue come to the fore when the system was tested in relation to evaluation of female academics. The first woman to earn her PhD in Sweden, Ellen Fries, successfully defended her thesis in history at Uppsala University in 1883. Her dissertation, however, only received *non sine laude approbatur* and her defense an even lower grade, *approbatur*.

The seemingly “failed” career of Fries, who, it should be noted, continued to produce historical scholarship until her early death at 44 years old, has not gone unnoticed. Historian Birgitta Odén, herself one of the pioneers of women in academia as the first professor of history in 1965, clearly connects Fries’ exclusion from Swedish academia with the fact that her dissertation did not receive what Odén explicitly refers to as the “docent grade”. Furthermore, she states that the “docent echelon” was particularly high during the 1880s, suggesting that the grade was awarded with the competition in mind. Odén also traces other women who did not receive a high enough grade to be welcomed into the academic ranks. Detailing the competitive milieu facing another female historian, Lydia Wahlström, graduating in 1898, Odén suggests that the low grade (*non sine*) could have offered a mechanism to exclude women from the male sphere (Odén 1980: 253).

Faculty protocols often lack information regarding discussions leading up to a decision, and if they do, there’s no way to be sure how accurately they reflect the full arbitrations that took place. Fries’ grades were simply stated in the protocol, with the added information that three of the members of the section had protested the *non sine*

and had advocated simply *approbatur*. However, correspondence from the opponent on Fries' dissertation sheds some additional light on the negotiation that preceded the faculty grading, demonstrating how arbitrary aspects could factor in or even determine the result. It also shows that these matters did, after all, not only concern the small collegiate body and the PhD, but also the scholarly community at large to which admittance was either open or closed.

Fries' opponent, Simon J. Boëthius, was approached a few months after the defense by the editor of the newly founded Swedish historical journal (*Historisk tidskrift*) who expressed qualms about the dissertation, of which he was considering writing a critical review. Boëthius admitted that the section board had not been in agreement over which grade to award Fries, leading to a discussion on whether or not she should be awarded *cum laude* or *non sine laude*, that is, whether an academic career was to be encouraged. A complicating factor, Boëthius wrote, was that the previous semester a "higher grade norm" had been implemented. Boëthius lamented that he had not had time to scrutinize Fries' primary sources due to his heavy teaching load, but that although he had not been "asked directly", he had still voiced the opinion that *non sine* was as high as he would go. He approved of the plan to put the editor's objections into print, since they had proven validated by the collegium in the humanities section, and because "Fries and numerous others" were of the opinion that her grade had been too low. Yet, he felt that it was preferable if such criticism was not directed at Fries alone, since that would be seen as "persecution" against her "as a woman". In the end, the editor wrote a critical review essay of several new dissertations (Hildebrand & Westling 1883). In sum, judging by the editorial correspondence, changing evaluative standards, time constraints, individual initiative, and gender concerns were all factors that influenced the evaluation of Fries.

As noted by historian Hanna Markusson Winkvist in her study of female academics (slowly) entering the male sphere of Swedish academia from the 1880s to the middle of the twentieth century, the Swedish academic system only seems to have accepted women who successfully adapted to its male codes and practices (2003: 93, 217). But even then, the challenges were numerous. This is aptly illustrated by the first woman to obtain a docentship in the humanities, literary historian Hilma Borelius, who also received a docent stipend. The basis for these achievements was, as we have seen, her grades; Borelius was awarded the second highest grade possible, *cum insigniori laude* on both her dissertation and the oral defense. The section accepted, as far as the protocol tells us, the estimation of one of the professors who lauded Borelius' work as displaying "an unusual degree of mature judgment and conscientious research" (Section protocol, Nov 16, 1909). Less than a year later, the section favorably evaluated Borelius' docent application, to which she also had attached additional written works. The premise that a docentship was the key to a career in academia, coupled with the fact that everyone seemed in agreement over the qualities that Borelius demonstrated, might lead us to assume that she was well on her way to being part of the scholarly community. It was not until several years later, however, that she was offered to hold a handful of lectures, and more than a decade later that she was given the docent stipend, causing the section to debate whether or not she was too old at 53 (Markusson Winkvist 2003: 127–128). The impressive grade had indeed led to the coveted title of docent, but had hardly flung the doors to academia

wide open, illustrating how the academic career in certain cases could be subject to various forms of opaque resistance from within the system, even though the credentials seemed to be in place.

An Applicant with Foreign Credentials?

The so-called “Myhrman controversy” in the early 1910s entailed another type of outsider seeking to enter the senior academic community of the Swedish humanities. It concerned the appointment of a docent stipend in Semitic languages at Uppsala University (Eskhult 2013: 19–37; Frängsmyr 2010: 168–171), serving as an example of how the seemingly standard process of appointing docents could be disrupted. The conflict elicited a long series of formal complaints communicated via extensive pamphlets, and the details of the conflict were soon reported in the media, provoking more general questions concerning the value of foreign degrees or merits and the ability to circumvent common gatekeeping practices.

David W. Myhrman had been awarded the title of docent in 1902. The local section board had been divided on this decision, however, due to the fact that Myhrman had not provided any documented proof of his dissertation defense or teaching skills (Section protocol, May 22, 1902, in Zetterstéen 1912). After previous studies in Chicago, Cambridge, and Leipzig, with a doctoral degree from the latter institution, his international profile would cause him trouble, but his broad networks also gave him an opportunity to challenge the Swedish evaluation system.

When a docent stipend in Semitic languages was to be awarded in 1911, a fierce conflict erupted as the appointed reviewer recommended a more junior scholar ahead of Myhrman (Moberg 1912). As a complicating factor, the chair professor at Uppsala, Karl V. Zetterstéen, had supported Myhrman three years earlier, that is, the previous time this stipend was awarded, at a point when there were no competing applicants, but now he instead lent his support to the other candidate. This prompted Myhrman to write a public letter of complaint, addressed to the King in Council (*Kungl. Maj:t*), the governmental body that made decisions in the name of the monarch, questioning whether it was appropriate for a public servant to change his assessment in such a way. Referring to a number of recommendation letters which he had received from “eminent” international peers, together with printed reviews of his works, Myhrman argued that he should be considered fully competent for the docent stipend (Myhrman 1911: 9–10, 19), while Zetterstéen, in turned, claimed that his previous, positive assessment had been of a preliminary character and that Myhrman had not lived up to his expectations, eventually accusing him of scholarly negligence, numerous errors, and plagiarism (Zetterstéen 1911: 5–11, 16).

The conflict basically turned into a trial, with the actors involved seeking to prove whether Myhrman had committed fraud or not. As a result, the academic evaluative framework had to be weighed against civil law, noteworthy in itself since Swedish universities had operated according to its own jurisdiction up until the nineteenth century. Now, it was, however, questioned as to whether an academic body really had the right, or ability, to practice layman-law and to establish truths through collegial vote, which after all depended on which colleagues that happened to be present on a certain date (Section protocol, September 16, 1912 in Zetterstéen 1913).

As the conflict developed, Myhrman soon found himself subject to “personal persecution”, rendering him a “dead man” in the local Uppsala environment with bleak career opportunities (Myhrman 1912: 4, 59, 119). Was Myhrman even eligible for a stipend, not having passed through any Swedish secondary school and having no Swedish degree, asked his chastiser, urging the section to investigate Myhrman’s original docent appointment (Zetterstéen 1912: 20–23). Looking back at the minutes from the meeting of the humanities section in 1902, it turns out that it was a single professor who had managed to convince the board members ahead of the votum, arguing that while it was indeed doubtful whether Myhrman’s degree corresponded to a Swedish one, such a degree was not “indispensable” for a docentship, in a similar line of reasoning as in the aforementioned Weibull case. Myhrman’s recommendation letters had been seen as convincing, and there was at the time a strong need of a docent in Semitic languages (Section protocol, May 22, 1902, in Zetterstéen 1912). Clearly then, it was not only skills displayed through a docent grade or other printed publications that counted for the evaluation, but also more general statements from diverse authorities and local teaching needs.

Despite the fierce opposition, Myhrman was in the end awarded the docent stipend with a slight majority in the section’s vote. The minutes from the section board meetings reveal concerns not only about the reputation of Semitic languages, but Swedish scholarship at large. It was, for instance, remarked that, in accordance with existing practice, the section had equated Myhrman’s dissertation merits with a Swedish grade of *cum laude*. If the section would disapprove of Myhrman’s docentship retroactively, it would compromise itself, as its public legitimacy to a large extent rested on its internal evaluative practices (Section protocol March 23, 1912, in Mattsson 1912). In the end, it became evident that no local academic authority was strong enough to settle the dispute. Neither was the national university chancellor. The case was instead forwarded to the King in Council, who confirmed the decision to award Myhrman the stipend, but only for one year rather than the full three-years period, although this was clearly a pyrrhic victory; Myhrman abandoned his academic career, instead ending up as a countryside vicar (Zetterstéen 1924: 25).

The Myhrman case is revealing as the Swedish government turned out to be the ultimate source of authority, indicating the importance of understanding evaluative cultures in their specific local and national contexts, although the dispute was clearly entangled in an international web of peers who provided recommendation letters. A diverse network of experts was mobilised by the combatants, who repeatedly took their own initiatives to request external reviews beyond the control of the local academic bodies.

A Disciple from an Opposing Intellectual School?

One member of the humanities section who took an active part in the debates on Myhrman’s docent merits was professor of philosophy Axel Hägerström. Being the figurehead of the so-called school of Uppsala philosophy, he gathered numerous disciples, also in other disciplines, such as theology and law. Upon Hägerström’s retirement, things became turbulent in the 1930s as a power vacuum emerged with internal competition among young philosophers. This situation proved to be fertile ground

for a new series of controversies connected to the evaluation of doctors/docents. The ensuing debates on the merits of a number of dissertations highlighted tensions between Uppsala philosophy and another tradition associated with Lund, thus representing two distinct regional cultures of knowledge. The competition among aspiring academics easily turned into a clash between much larger interests. As noted by Svante Bohman, one of Hägerström's disciples who presented his doctoral dissertation in 1933, young scholars typically required the support from "authorities", and if they received such support, ongoing affairs tended to "ignite a battle between the great spirits" (Bohman 1934a: 5).

Hägerström himself recommended *cum laude* on Bohman's dissertation, but guided by the suggestion of a younger docent – who, due to its vacant chair, acted as the discipline's representative – the section in Uppsala settled on *approbatur* (Bohman 1934b). Nonetheless, since the dissertation still passed and was supported by Hägerström, it was interpreted as an imperialistic or "barbaric" attempt by Uppsala philosophy to conquer yet another discipline, in this case literary history, initiating a ruthless debate that would run for almost a year in newspapers and periodicals (e.g., Landquist 1934; Nilsson 1934; see also Nordin 1984: 68).

One thing that became clear in this case was that older personal conflicts were inherited. As one example, John Landquist, mentioned in the introductory example of this article, intervened in the debate, possibly due to personal resentment over the fact that Hägerström, 25 years earlier, had refused to award Landquist his docent grade (Lundstedt 1934: 3). Negotiations regarding this grade could thus provide an opportunity for vengeance. Ingemar Hedenius, another philosopher who eventually received the *cum laude* grade in the 1930s – despite the fact that Landquist, who was involved in the grading, only advocated *approbatur* (Nordin 2004: 72–78) – was, for instance, described as a "rabid champion for doctoral students unable to receive a docent grade" due to his own experiences (*Expressen* 1951). Moreover, as insinuated by the aforementioned Sven Stolpe in his diary notes ahead of his public defense, professors at times even bargained over docent grades, offering to vote for a good grade for their colleagues' candidates if the favour was reciprocated (Stolpe 1970: 135).

The struggles among Uppsala philosophers would continue throughout the 1930s. Another conflict that reached the headlines concerned Magnus Selling, who was awarded *cum laude* but not accepted as docent by the University Chancellor, who ignored the decision of the humanities section. Some members of this body had argued for a lower grade, *approbatur*, possibly influenced by two local philosophy docents, who had voiced strong criticism at Selling's extensive public defense and via written statements to the section (Nordin 1984: 110–114). Selling appealed against the Chancellor's decision to the King in Council, although in vain (Selling 1938; 1939). He did not become docent, but instead left the university, ending up as secondary school teacher in a mining town far away from the traditional academic centres. Reflecting upon his prospects, Selling seems to have been aware that his chances were bleak against the united Uppsala philosophers. Noting that he belonged to an alternative camp, Selling remarked that it was "not uncommon in Swedish academic circles that when hostilities are directed towards an academic teacher and his regime, one aims at the disciples" (Selling 1938: 11–12).

Moreover, the opposing sides of the conflict seemed to represent a political divide. Selling had been criticised for trying to accommodate his dissertation to “the current conditions in Germany”, for instance by citing Heidegger but not Cassirer (Selling 1938: 24–25, 66; 1939: 7). This latent political tension is likely to have echoed throughout the philosophy disputes, as the Uppsala school was associated with the progressivist ideology of the emerging Swedish welfare state, while their opponents were often linked to various forms of conservatism and pro-German outlooks, in some cases even stigmatised by association with Nazi ideology (see Östling 2016: 138–145, and also Heidegren 2021). Not only individual ties of loyalty to professors, but also broader political conditions influenced the evaluative processes that have been covered in this article, as these gate-keeping practices would decide the future composition of the Swedish academic elite.

Conclusions: The Docent Grade as an Evaluative Moment

While battles raged in Uppsala, an article appeared in one of the daily newspapers that discussed problems associated with the assessment of doctors according to the differentiated grading scale. By and large, it ended up emphasising some of the key factors investigated in this study. For one thing, the article pointed out that the doctoral grade was not only of major concern to university academics, but to society at large as it also determined the careers of secondary school teachers with doctoral degrees. In addition, the article stressed that despite its significance, there was in fact no guarantee that this grading was conducted according to fair principles. Instead, contingencies played a great role and different disciplines were clearly incommensurable. Finally, the article also noted how difficult it was to harmonize Swedish evaluative decisions with the wider international community (Romdahl 1937).

Moreover, the art history professor who wrote the article expected things to change, and for assessments of dissertations to play less of a role in determining careers. In this respect he proved accurate. As the great postwar wave of student expansion rolled in, problems with the multiscale doctoral grading system seemed to mount. There were also incentives in Sweden – just like many other countries during the early postwar expansion of higher education – to quickly produce new doctors, as new academic teachers were required in order to accommodate all the incoming students (e.g. Teichler 2011). A governmental commission concerned with doctoral education was eventually appointed in 1963, leading up to the major reform in 1969, which introduced the pass or fail system and detached the PhD from the docent assessment. After this reform, peer evaluation of doctors and early career academics is, indeed, still pivotal to boundary work and negotiation of norms and quality criteria in academia at large. In lack of the previous scale for assessment, however, this particular evaluative moment does no longer tend to be as career-defining. The “real” gatekeeping has been postponed to a later stage, as a PhD today is normally not sufficient (although necessary) for a tenured position in the humanities, and the dissertation has become more of a minimum requirement than a decisive indicator of quality (Elmgren, Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson 2024: 448, 453; Lindberg 2022: 232).

Despite global isomorphism and purported academic norms of universalism, evaluative cultures must be understood in specific geographical and historical contexts (Elmgren, Lindberg-Sand & Sonesson 2024: 429–430; Reymert, Jungblut & Borlaug 2021). Recent research has thus articulated a need of future, comparative studies that empirically investigate and discuss the different roles played by doctoral grades in national systems of education (de Vogel 2022: 1177). Up until 1969, it is possible to distinguish a specific Swedish evaluative culture associated with the assessment of doctors and docents, where the docent grade functioned as a tool of boundary work that could keep women as well as intellectual and political dissidents out of the senior academic system. This culture was characterised by its paradoxical features including the public dimension of academic evaluation, as this was clearly no exclusive concern of the professoriate. What seats of authority one could appeal to was an open – and contested – question that occasionally put the very credibility of universities at stake when regular evaluation and recruitment practices were challenged (Nilsson 2009a: 58). In that sense, the Swedish evaluative culture was based on a multipolar and cross-sectoral set of authoritative foundations, including political institutions, media, and international peers (Gedutis & Kirtiklis 2023). Debates on the docent grade neither followed the boundaries of disciplines nor the academy as such.

Upon closer scrutiny, this evaluative culture also turns out to be characterised by a lack of strictly codified evaluative practices, while still being part of a uniquely transparent national system of public administration, which posed specific challenges to the intellectual credibility and legitimacy of quality control. Our point is that academic evaluation rarely functions in such a formalised way as it may seem. What seemed to be self-evident routines to most actors, were inevitably embedded in intricate power networks which could be challenged or restructured under certain circumstances. Our empirical examples indicate that various forms of (formal and informal) negotiations and boundary work were constantly ongoing. Since the outcome of a public defence and the following docent assessment was so essential for an academic career prior to 1969, the incentives were strong for various actors to invest heavily into the contexts where the docent grade was awarded (or not).

In this article, we have demonstrated that despite its opaque and mutable nature, the “docent grade” could drastically determine the fates of individuals and cause tremors in the academic landscape at large. Yet, we would also point out, in view of international literature on the broader developments of university governance and “erosion of faculty authority” in more recent decades, that the power that resided with such academic bodies was not unrestricted in the past either since the political government typically proved to be the ultimate source of authority (cf. Sahlin & Eriksson-Zetterqvist 2023). Via accumulation of alternative capital there were indeed ways to circumvent the regular doctor/docent assessment. Academia was far from a closed system, but deeply interwoven with the political and cultural fabrics of a society with multiple sources of authority and plenty of arenas for articulation and negotiation of academic quality. This was particularly visible in the humanities, as scholars in these disciplines frequently participated in media debates and acted as public intellectuals. The diverse character of academic authority is important to highlight in the light of Lamont’s (2009) discussion of how “quality cultures” tend to be cultivated locally in the practice of certain disciplines, recently referred to as

“quality from within” (Müller et al 2024; see also Langfeldt et al 2020). Hopefully, the example of the Swedish docent grade can encourage international scrutiny of the impact and functioning of informal and uncoded practices of peer evaluation more broadly, both concerning their various historical trajectories and multiple (or possible) forms in today’s academia (Horbach & Halfman 2018).

Current evaluation practices in the humanities tend to obscure the many interests, negotiations, and aspects of public accountability that come into an evaluative process. While previous literature mainly has focused on evaluation of scientific literature or funding (e.g. Baldwin 2018; Csiszar 2016, Reinhart & Schendzielorz 2024), our study of the elusive Swedish docent grade contributes to a broader picture by looking at the long history and open-ended character of peer evaluation, which may inspire a more inclusive discussion of what the optimal forms of peer reviewing in the humanities can be (Wien 2024). By highlighting the conflicts and negotiations, as well as the public dimension and lack of limited confines of assessments conducted in the humanities in the past, our article shows that peer evaluation has not always been performed anonymously ahead of major decisions or behind closed doors. “Novel” evaluative practices, such as “open peer review”, may thus not be as revolutionary as they first might seem. With longer historical perspectives we will be better able to speak with accuracy about change and continuity in the history of evaluation.

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