The Procedural Openness of Nordic Welfare State Restructuring

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Openness is a fundamental element of the democratic ideal, allowing citizens access to the realm of political power and giving them a role in its exercise. However, openness may be conceptualized and understood in many ways and more specific perspectives on openness are bound to vary. Administrative openness is perhaps the most straightforward way of understanding what openness is about: in a transparent and democratic society citizens ought to have access to information concerning the implementation of laws and regulations. This kind of openness is part of the Scandinavian and Nordic self-image, but this self-image may be delusive in many ways.

Another common notion is that modern societies are progressing towards ever higher degrees of openness. The fall of the Soviet Union and the success of the European Union (EU) to include new member states might lead to declarations of the final victory of the politics of openness and transparency. This notion may prove to be as delusive as the notion of openness as something essentially Nordic or Scandinavian.

The Nordic welfare state has been popular among its citizens and has gained international attention. The traditional post-war Nordic model included ideals of solidarity and equality that were put into practice through rigorously maintained public welfare policies. In the 1990s this welfare model became subject to restructuring as a result of major ideological changes in politics. At stake was the openness of the legislative changes that came about as part of the restructuring process.

Hence, procedural openness is another dimension of our theme. In the Nordic countries policy change typically involves legislative change as well. The Nordic countries follow the civil law tradition with its detailed regulation of both private and public life. We understand procedural openness as referring to the exercise of legislative powers and it includes the processes whereby political issues are debated publicly, power resources of political parties are decided, and legislation drafted by governments and decided upon by parliaments. This understanding of procedural openness draws on discussions of ‘procedural democracy’, a term sometimes used in order to refer to democratic ideals, such as effective participation, voting equality,
understanding of political choices, and control over the political agenda (Gordon 2001).

The chapter will proceed as follows: first the concept of procedural openness will be discussed in terms of the usage of power. Second, the case of Nordic welfare state restructuring will be analysed from the point of view of openness and the usage of power. Third, drawing on the preceding presentation, the concluding section will present the argument that the usage of power that emerged along with the restructuring of the Nordic welfare state significantly compromised the ideals associated with procedural openness of decision making.

Openness and the Usage of Power

Powerful elites may not always desire procedural openness, depending on the way power is used. Conventionally power may be seen as a means to maintain order. This is an obvious aspect since it affects most social encounters: society is dominated by rules which are enforced in various ways – ultimately by the use of physical force. However, there is a complementary aspect of power, namely, power as a means of implementing ideals. This is a particular feature of post-Enlightenment Western societies in which a form of power has emerged that is preoccupied with changing the existing order towards an imagined ideal. One can think of the motto of the French Revolution: liberty, equality, fraternity as a summary of such a utopia (Rahkonen 1996).

The common distinction between power *over* (domination) and power *to* (empowerment) also sheds light upon different uses of power (Haugaard 2012). Behind the distinction applied here is a question about how those in power intend to shape societies. Thus, domination may be the most efficient way to maintain order, whereas empowerment may be more efficient in guiding societies toward certain ideals.

Table 7.1 shows how the function and desirability of openness varies depending on the way power is used.¹ The distinction between power as maintaining order and power as implementing ideals is meant as a heuristic description of two sides of a concept. In abstract terms a balance between these two aspects

¹ There is a venerable tradition in the social sciences studying power. Marx discussed both ideals and power struggles, Weber illustrated how administrative power worked, Foucault examined the subtle techniques of using power, and Habermas clarified some of the ideals associated with power, just to mention a few classic examples (Marx 1986; Weber 1968; Foucault 1997; Habermas 2001).