

# Why Public Libraries in Sweden Did Not Choose Dewey

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**Abstract:** The article identifies two distinct sections, one within the public library sphere and one in academic libraries, relevant for the development of a unique Swedish classification system (the SAB-system) to be used in public libraries. These are used to analyse the social and discursive influences that led to a rejection of the DDC as the common classification system for the public libraries in Sweden. The author analyses the debate that took place in the 1910s in various publications and identifies theoretical as well as some practical reasons for rejecting the DDC. Reference is also made to the situation in Norway and Denmark at this time and their attempts to influence Sweden to accept the DDC as had been done in these countries. Conclusions are drawn that the reasons for rejection of the DDC not only is to be sought in theoretical or even practical problems regarding the system itself but in the academic library sector which, through the SAB-system, could create a lasting influence on the knowledge organisation in public libraries in order to uphold the national identity of the Swedish library system.

## 1. Introduction

In 1917 at the Annual Meeting of the Swedish Library Association (SAB) a committee was formed on the initiative of the librarian at the Malmö Workers' Library, Frithiof Berlin, aiming at the creation of a unified classification system for Swedish public libraries, school libraries and other comparable libraries (Berättelse..., 1917). By this time there was already an ongoing discussion about how such a classification system should be designed. This discussion had been initiated through a decision in the Swedish parliament in 1912, which stated that federal funding of public libraries should be guaranteed if the libraries bought their literature from a National Standard Catalog which was to be set up for this special purpose. The State Library Consultant Fredrik Hjelmqvist was appointed as editor of this catalog. The first edition was released in 1915, but in 1913 when the subject organisation in it was discussed, Hjelmqvist contacted the Head Librarian of the National Library, E.W. Dahlgren, who recommended the use of the National Acquisition Catalog for the academic libraries as a model for the catalog's systematisation (Hjelmqvist, 1950, p.

350). This eventually proved to be the first expression of an attitude that would shape the development of *Klassifikationssystem för Svenska Bibliotek* (the SAB-system), which was to be presented at the SAB Annual Meeting in 1921 (see Appendix A).

I have in a recent study (Hansson, 1996a; 1996b) outlined two major discursive formations that were competing in the classification debate as a whole, recognised as a public library discourse and an academic library discourse. The aim of this article is to focus on one single issue, that of how the affiliation with any of these discourses influenced the attitudes toward a possible implementation of the Dewey system into the developing Swedish public library structure in the beginning of the 20th century. I do this through the study of the public debate as it appears on this issue in official printed material, the most important for this discussion being the Swedish Library Journal, *Biblioteksbladet*, and the Annual Meetings of SAB. First however, I provide a brief background on the Swedish public library development at the time and of the earlier classification practice in various public library precursors and in academic libraries.

## 2. Early Public Library Development in Sweden

The evolution of the public library sector in Sweden is tightly connected with the democratic development that was initiated primarily through the rapidly increasing power of the Social Democratic Party during the first two decades of the 20th century. Up until the turn of the century the state ideology was repressive and conservative, which ill-suited the coming of the industrial society with its new demographic structures and political requirements. Until 1905 the state had shown very little interest in library issues, claiming that these were of no national concern and that the need for involvement was fulfilled through the commitment of the state-church by its upholding of parish libraries (Burius 1994). The public library precursors can be divided into four main categories: the parish libraries, the socialist workers' libraries, the liberal-philanthropic libraries and the popular movement libraries. There were large differences between them in terms of ideological affiliations, aims and size. Except for the parish libraries that since the mid-19th century had been representatives of the official power, they all worked as parts of the democratic movement, focusing principally on the self-education of the working classes (Sjösten, 1993, Torstensson, 1995).

The coming of democracy meant a more active state that increasingly has intervened in various parts of society. The popular library sector came to benefit from this mainly through a decision in parliament in 1912, when it was decided, after a thorough investigation (Palmgren, 1911), that governmental funding of public libraries should be granted to the various forms of popular libraries according to certain conditions. It was also decided that a special authority, the State Library Consultant, should be established in order to coordinate the bringing together of the different popular libraries into a unified public library structure, much influenced by the free public libraries in the USA and UK.

These state initiatives were met from the library community with the founding of SAB in 1915 in order to be able to strengthen the profession and initiate various topics in the discussions with the Library Consultant. One of the issues that emerged in the discussions was that of a uniform classification for the public libraries collections. It is interesting to note that the academic libraries were surprisingly passive in this organisational development. They upheld a representation of the old constitution and showed little interest in the founding of the SAB. Their firmly established discourse had little need of influence from the new socially directed public library movement that had an ideological backing which did not give precedence to the values that had ruled the universi-

ties in the preceding century. When the classification issue was raised, however, there was interest from the academic library sphere, which eventually came to play a major role in the forming of the SAB-system (Hansson, 1995).

### 2.1. Earlier Swedish Classification Practice

In the preface of the first edition of the SAB-system the SAB Classification Committee writes that "the final reason for not applying this system [Dewey] in our country has for the committee been the respect for older practices in our libraries ... In most public libraries is in fact some sort of alphabetical system used, in the larger libraries often consisting of some twenty main classes" (Klassifikationssystem..., 1921, p. 6). It is notable that in a public library precursor, no matter if it was a worker's library, parish library or popular movement library, the classifications made were mostly given some sort of alphabetical notation. Two of the most influential models for the libraries were the classifications made in the standard catalogs set up as recommendations for acquisition by the two student unions at Uppsala University, the radical-liberal *Verdandi* and the conservative *Heimdal*. Both these catalogs also served as handbooks for the tending and development of various types of popular libraries, and their classifications were well distributed all over Sweden at the beginning of the 20th century. The classification in the second edition of the *Heimdal Catalog* (1905) was widely used as a shelving system for all sorts of non-academic libraries. The *Heimdal Catalog* had a totally alphabetical notation, while the *Verdandi Catalog* (1908) had a notation based on Roman numerals, an exception which was only followed by a handful of libraries, while the majority instead translated the classification into one having a more practical alphabetical notation.

Academic libraries at this time had a classification practice which was essentially different from that of the various popular libraries. The divisions in the systems at the university libraries were not identical but the basic structure was quite homogenous, with the use of abbreviations instead of any notational devices. The only classification with a systematic notation that was used in the academic library sphere was that of the above mentioned *National Aquisition Catalog*, which used an alphabetical notation.

No discussion on alternative forms of notation seems to have occurred, at least not in any official forum, until the upcoming debate on the possible application of the Dewey system. This debate received much nourishment from the development in the surrounding Nordic countries and the increasing influ-

ence of the American public-library model in the Swedish library sector.

### 3. International Influences

Representatives of the Swedish public library community got acquainted with the ideology and organisation of the Anglo-Saxon free public libraries through a speech by the Danish librarian Andreas Schack Steenberg at a meeting on popular education in Uppsala 1901. He spoke of the concept of the public library as something new which concerned the whole population and not just the discredited parts of it. Apart from novelties like open shelves, well thought out architectural solutions and prioritised children's departments, he spoke of the Dewey system and the Cutter tables (Tynell, 1931, p. 112). The experiences of the free public libraries that Steenberg had gained through journeys to the US had come to influence the Danish public library system at a very early stage, and the ideas were further publicised in Sweden primarily by Valfrid Palmgren around 1910 (Palmgren, 1909, Torstensson, 1994).

Stenberg's speech was very well received and in 1902 he published a book through the care of Verdandi, *Om Folkbibliotek*. It focuses mainly on library architecture, but while discussing the shelving and ordering of the books he does not speak of the Dewey system but states that "it is from many aspects the most practical to shelve the books in classes and then within each class in alphabetical order" (Stenberg, 1902, p.33). The method of doing this was in traditional Sweden, having a call number consisting of a class mark and a number which indicated its fixed place within the class.

It was this element of fixed call numbers that Dewey wanted to get away from when he constructed his classification system in 1876, but it would be ten more years before the ideas of Dewey made their entrance in the Scandinavian library community, when the Danish State Book Collection Committee, *Statens Bogsamlingskomité*, led by Steenberg, commenced a systematic overview of the Danish public libraries. "The collections were gone through, a lot was thrown away and many new acquisitions were made. A decimal classification was introduced as well as author marks and book cards" (Hvenegaard Lassen, 1962, p. 156). Eventually, in 1915, the first edition of the Danish version of the Dewey system saw the light of day.

In Norway, American library ideas had been an influence since the late 1890s, primarily through Haakon Nyhus at the Deichman Public Library in Oslo. Many representatives from Swedish libraries came there to study the new ideas as they had been executed. Fredrik Nilsson at Stockholm Workers' Library, which was the largest non-academic library at

this time in Sweden, went to both Oslo and København to examine conditions. What primarily impressed him was the use of open shelves which he described as "a bold decision" which put "a considerable part of the work on - the public" (Larsson, 1989, p. 111). In 1904 a delegation was sent from Malmö in preparation for the opening of the Malmö Public Library in 1905. They took a wider interest in different issues and decided to apply the Dewey system in their youth-department, following the practice at the Deichman Library (Nosslin, 1946, p. 26). This was the first time that a Swedish library applied the Dewey system to their collections. Malmö chose to follow the Norwegian model and thus adopted it more or less unaltered from the American edition, including the equally unaltered Cutter name tables.

This was not the method that was chosen in Denmark, where a thorough revision of the Dewey system, as well as the Cutter tables, was made in order to make them fit better into the structure of the Danish library collections. One problem was that the Dewey system was very American in its focus, which meant that small nations such as the Scandinavian ones were given long notations which was quite ungainly for the principally small public libraries with a large degree of local literature in their collections. This was solved by rearranging the Geography class so that e.g. the Topography of København was assigned 46.3 instead of a signature with six figures.

In particular the Danish influence, principally through Steenberg himself, was very strong on the Swedish public library movement the first decades of the 20th century. Denmark had its strongest impact on the national organisation of public libraries. In the field of classification, however, there was a much more suspicious attitude from many of the actors on the Swedish library scene, and the Danish argument about increased possibilities for cooperation and interaction through a common classification system met no enthusiasm.

### 4. The Swedish Attitude Towards the Dewey-System

At the 1917 annual meeting of SAB Lars Wåhlin, Head Librarian of the Göteborg University Library, emphasised the importance of having the coming classification system built on established Swedish classification practice. In the same spirit, Hjelmqvist stated that "the only classification system that has achieved some sort of international status, that by the American Dewey constructed Decimal Classification, had no prospect to gain any wider application among the scientific libraries in Europe" (Berättelse..., 1917, p.214). None of these statements was met by any opposition at the meeting. Hjelmqvist had clarified his

position on this issue a year earlier in an article published in *Biblioteksbladet* answering Steenberg, when he raised the issue. Steenberg writes in his article:

I would thus advise my Swedish colleagues to revise the Dewey system according to national requirements, develop name tables based on Cutter, but adapted to the names of Swedish authors and to use these revised systems in the organisation of the Swedish public libraries. Regarding the Decimal Classification, I do believe that the Swedish revision would benefit from the adoption of a decimal division, that would to a minimal degree differ from the Danish system. Thereby the cooperation between us will be highly encouraged. (Stenberg, 1916, p.118).

He further discusses the problems that the Norwegians had when applying the original American edition of the system i.e. the long notations, and regarding the Cutter tables, the fact that they derived from American names that were only to a very limited extent applicable for Scandinavian names. Steenberg states that "I cannot even think that anyone in Sweden ... will try to use Cutter's system unaltered" (Stenberg, 1916, p. 118).

Perhaps it was the experiences in Norway that led to Hjelmqvist's reluctant approach towards the two American systems. He saw advantages in the Dewey system primarily in the decimal division which made it possible to extend the system practically ad infinitum. He also admitted its advantages since it appeared in so many everyday situations, which made it easy for the library user to get accustomed to the system. However, he states, "regarding the Swedish libraries, the use of this system in an unaltered form would be no American short cut but a rather unpractical detour. Only if it existed a revised version like the Danish Decimal Classification mentioned by Prof. Steenberg, would there be reason to talk of any application of this in any smaller libraries" (Hjelmqvist, 1916, p.113). The thought of creating such an equivalence in the present situation simply did not seem worthwhile.

There were, however, those who advocated an application of the Dewey system in Sweden in the same way as had been done in Norway. When Alvida Sandberg published her influential book *Bibliotek och Biblioteksskötsel* in 1915, she argued for the importance of having a well thought out and theoretically solid classification of the collections in the Swedish libraries. She distinguishes four basic requirements of such a system.

1) the system should "be built on sensible theoretical principles, so that books with similar contents are placed beside each other and related subjects close to one another",

2) it should "be used in libraries of different kinds and in different local contexts",

3) it should be "flexible so that it allows new subjects to be introduced without disturbances either in the classification or the catalog",

4) it should be "easy to comprehend for the public and the notation should be plain and distinct" (Sandberg, 1915, pp. 49-50).

Whether the notation was alphabetical or numerical was of minor importance to Sandberg, but "arabian numbers are uncomparably easier to work with than a combination of letters and do not imply any confusion or mistakes" (Sandberg, 1915, p. 49). The Dewey-system was the only one available that could fill all the requirements that Sandberg wanted to see in a feasible classification system. Rather uncritically she advocated a direct application of the American edition of the Dewey-system as a whole. The problems that had occurred in Norway were not further considered and Steenberg states that "without being rude I think she would benefit from having a look down here in Denmark" (Stenberg, 1916, p. 116).

The emphasis on theoretical issues that Sandberg acknowledges is a part of the discussion that was put in the background behind various pragmatic considerations and this focus seems thus to somewhat isolate her in relation to other actors taking part in the debate. Her views on classification are as a whole overlooked and though she gives practical examples in the book on the application of the Dewey system in a Swedish school-library, she is much ignored. On the theoretical issue there is one exception which should be mentioned, that is in the preface of the SAB-system where it is stated that the rejection of the Dewey system is due to "first and foremost theoretical considerations" (Klassifikationssystem..., 1921, p. 6). The argument from a theoretical standpoint in the system though is very vague and unfocused. The way in which Sandberg adapts Dewey in the Swedish school-library example is simply to exclude those classes that are considered as not necessary or covered by the collections. The only exception is the synthesis of Asia and Australia in 915. The American edition has Australia on its own in 919.

The strong advocacy of American ideas of the free public library that was being put forward by Sandberg was warmly welcomed and spread widely in almost every part of public library thinking except on the issue of classification. A skeptical voice, which is representative of the academic libraries, was that of Gustav Adde, who in a review of Sandberg's book states that "even though Swedish libraries have a lot to learn from American free public libraries, one must ask whether it is suitable to copy everything which is being used there. I am primarily referring to

the Dewey Decimal Classification" (Adde, 1915, p. 393). Adde's critique of the system focuses on two major issues, the Anglo-Saxon worldview which is mirrored in the system, something which is confirmed by Frohmann (1994) and Wilson (1992), and the fact that principally due to this, the system seems only applicable to large libraries and not small ones, e.g. school libraries, as had been claimed by Sandberg. Moreover he states that the examples that he had seen of various attempts to adjust the system in Sweden had been less than confident.

#### 4.1. *The Attitude Toward the Dewey-System Within the SAB Classification Committee*

The Dewey system is discussed at length in the preface of the SAB-system and references are made to the Classification Committee's discussions on the possibilities of introducing the system in Sweden. It is worth noting that all members of the committee but one in one way or another represented the academic libraries. It was, as mentioned, regarded highly improper to adopt the Dewey system according to the American edition and the committee clarifies why it was also difficult to make a revision such as the one that had been undertaken in Denmark: "If one undertakes a thorough revision such as has been made in e.g. Denmark, the advantages of the international character of the system will vanish and also after such a revision it becomes difficult to use the American edition to update the system" (Klassifikationssystem..., 1921, p. 5). The argument of system development is one that has not been explicit in the preceding debate. To have a system that is not dependant on the development of an international edition but to be able to revise it on national premises is an argument which is strongly emphasised in the SAB-system itself.

It is clear though that the committee studied the Danish system thoroughly, and they were not uninfluenced by it. What was chiefly apparent was the inspiration for the division of the Geography Class. The most obvious change that was made in the Danish system was the separation of Geography from History in Class 9, placing the former in Class 4, which in the American edition was given to Philology and thus brought that together with the Literature Class in 8, i.e. a change similar to the one which appeared in the UDC in the mid 1960s. This made the Nordic countries more flexible both with regard to geography and history. The geographical division of the SAB-system is very similar to the Danish, though in some parts it is somewhat deeper, e.g. in the class Nm - Poland Russia and the Baltic Provinces. In the Swedish precursor, the National Standard Catalog of 1915, the Geography class went no further

in its division than the continents and it was put together with Ethnography and Folklore, which in the SAB-system is assigned a separate class, Mb - Ethnography with a geographical division. In the Danish system (1915) Ethnography is also treated separately (Class 59) but given a different division, 59.1 - Natural History of Man, 59.8 - General Archaeology and 59.9 - General Prehistoric Archaeology.

The argument for an alphabetical notation is said to be grounded on theoretical consideration. The struggle to create natural divisions is facilitated by using 25 main classes instead of 10. As an example it can be mentioned that the 8th edition of Dewey (1913) brings together under 600 - Useful Arts, such diverse subjects as 610 - Medicine, 620 - Engineering, 630 - Agriculture, 640 - Domestic Economy, 650 - Communication and Commerce, 660 - Chemical Technology, 670 - Manufactures, 680 - Mechanical Trades and 690 - Building. Artificial co-locations of this kind were something that the committee wanted to avoid. In the discussion on the theoretical disadvantages of the Dewey system though, there is a hint that the reluctant attitude was not entirely unproblematic: "It is clear though that e.g. the Dewey system, properly modified, could offer an alternative for Swedish libraries as a usable classification, which could work in spite of its unavoidable logical deficiencies" (Klassifikationssystem..., 1921, p.5). Just what deficiencies, other than the crowd in some main divisions the committee is referring to, is not revealed in the SAB-system preface. The Dewey system was guided by primarily two considerations, simplicity and mnemonics. The SAB-system was explicitly copying the principles of the latter while the former seems not to have been of any prime interest.

#### 4.2. *The Advocates*

The discussion that took place regarding the Dewey question in the first two decades of the 20th century was not very extensive and concerned only a limited number of actors. It was mostly raised *en passant* in a more holistic argumentation for the public library ideas. In spite of this it is possible to distinguish some relations between them and to point to some factors that might shed light on the patterns of power between the competing sectors of the library community in Sweden at this time. Looking at the participants in the discussion that have been mentioned in this article it is possible to group them in two distinct categories: 1) the representatives of the academic libraries, being Dahlgren, Wåhlin and Adde, and 2) the representatives of the public libraries, Palmgren, Sandberg, Berlin, Nilsson and also the aforementioned delegation from Malmö that went to Oslo in 1904. Fredrik Hjelmqvist holds a position

somewhere in between, being both a University Librarian, State Library Consultant and a major force in the founding of SAB. He is also the chairman of the SAB Classification Committee. It is clear that the attitude towards the Dewey system among these persons in many cases coincides with their belonging to the academic or public library sector.

The arguments of those advocating the use of the Dewey-system can be divided in three main categories which are all closely related to each other:

1) the application of the Dewey-system by simply taking over the American edition. The main advantage of this would be of an international character,

2) an adaption of the system in the way that had been made in Denmark. This would mean that it would be possible to establish deeper bibliographical cooperation and exchange within a Scandinavian context. The system would also be simpler to work with for e.g. small libraries.

3) It would be a natural step in the general introduction of the ideas behind the free public libraries. Since the system was used in such an environment in both the US and in Norway, it was seen as well adapted to fit the open-shelf systems and other features of this, at the time, new library thinking. This argument reveals a longing to get away from primarily the repressiveness of the parish library system which had been a drag on the lack of resources and its tie to the state state-church ideology.

The participants in the discussion that advocated the Dewey system all belonged to the public library sector in one way or another. They had also, at one time or another, studied the use of the system in a context outside Sweden, primarily in the US and Norway. A.S. Steenberg, who had introduced Dewey in Denmark had also made thorough studies in both the US and England. Among all these representatives there was a strong awareness about current public library development on an international level. This awareness was influential in the decision of the parliament of 1912 based on the investigation by Valfrid Palmgren, who had made long study-journeys to the US and explicitly sought to implement the new ideas in the new national library structure that were evolving.

#### 4.3. The Opponents

The arguments put forward by those who opposed the introduction of the Dewey-system can be said to comprise at least four parts:

1) the reference to older Swedish classification practice. The use of numerical system was practically absent, with the above mentioned exception of the Verdandi Standard Catalog using Roman numerals. This was the case in both popular libraries and aca-

demic. To develop the use of alphabetical notation thus seemed more natural.

2) The National Standard Catalog for public libraries which was conceived in 1915 used a classification built on the one in the National Acquisition Catalog for academic libraries, and building the SAB-system onto this would guarantee a continuity of the worldview established in the two former catalogs.

3) The advantages with the international character of the Dewey system were regarded as much exaggerated, especially when studying the system as it was seen in Denmark.

4) The theoretical considerations. These were made explicit in the preface of the SAB-system and were restricted to its being easier to make natural divisions with some twenty-five main classes instead of ten.

In the old pre-industrial Swedish society the universities had held a central position in the forming of the philosophy of the state and their influence was far-reaching in the state administration. With the coming of democracy the development rejected this order with its conservative character, including strong elements of isolationism and national protectionism. It is therefore not surprising to find that all of those who in the public discussions claimed preference to the Swedish tradition came from the academic sector which had difficulties adhering to the ideas of the free public libraries, which they regarded as something that did not affect them at all. That also explains why the academic librarians were relatively uninterested in participating in the work of SAB and why they suddenly showed such an interest in the classification issue. The classification of the National Acquisition Catalog was one that mirrored the conservative idealism that Sweden now was moving away from, and they were eager to maintain this division of knowledge that had been established in the old Swedish society in accordance with an old Eurocentric epistemological tradition, which is thus handed down to the SAB-system (Klasson, 1996).

The fact that academic librarians did succeed is due to many reasons, among those their stronger professional authority which allowed them to prevail in an issue so strongly connected to the core of the library profession. Another aspect that might have played a part was the personal influence of Fredrik Hjelmqvist who was regarded as *primus inter pares* on most library issues at this time. Coming from the academic sector and upholding the position of State Library Consultant he was close to the professional argument when it came to giving precedence in the analysis of the issue.

## 5. Conclusion

There are two quotations in this article that are crucial for the understanding of the Swedish attitude toward the Dewey system at this time: that where Hjelmqvist states that the Dewey system is not suitable for the scientific libraries in Sweden (Berättelse..., 1917, p. 214) and that where the Classification Committee states that it might well be that the Dewey-system could work well within a public library context (Klassifikationssystem..., 1921, p. 5). These two reveal that even though it might have been not only possible to carry through an acceptable application of Dewey in the public libraries, but also, as has been shown, highly appreciated by public librarians, it was the academic sector that won the right of interpretation and set the rules. The reasons for this can be sought in many aspects of the historical relation between the two sectors.

Among academic libraries there was a concern about the role they would play in the new social development. The universities could no longer have the strong impact on the state that they had possessed earlier, and being a part of this, the librarians were obviously reluctant to adhere to the new American library ideas. On the classification issue this was manifested through a position which indicated a strong ideological affiliation to a European view on the organisation of knowledge.

There are, however, reasons to believe that arguments other than this ideological one were at hand when identifying the reasons for the Swedish rejection of Dewey. Practical considerations must be given a high degree of importance. The fact that the National Standard Catalog was conceived only a couple of years before the constitution of the SAB Classification committee was regarded as a very strong argument for an order that was already being established within the public libraries. At the same time the relation of the subject division to the academic libraries could create a common ground from which a collaboration could be established between the two spheres when eventually the public libraries would be the unified corpus that they were supposed to be. The thought of reclassification in practically every library in the country simply did not seem worthwhile.

## Appendix A.

### *The SAB-system (1 ed. 1921)*

- A Books and Libraries, Bibliographies
- B General Works, Miscellaneous
- C Religion
- D Philosophy
- E Education
- F Philology

- G Literature
- H Fiction
- I Beaux Arts (with Music and Theater)
- J Archaeology
- K History
- L Biography (with Genealogy)
- M Anthropology, Ethnography
- N Geography
- Social Science, Law (with National Economy and Statistics)
- P Technology
- Q Economy (with Industry, Commerce and Communication)
- R Gymnastics, Sports, Games and Playing
- S Military Science
- T Mathematics
- U Natural Sciences
- V Medicine

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