



**INSTITUTIONEN FÖR SOCIALT ARBETE**

**Understödetts rationalitet.  
En genealogisk studie av arbetslinjen under kapitalismen.**

av

**Tobias Davidsson**

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**Akademisk avhandling**

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av filosofie doktorexamen framläggs till offentlig granskning**

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## Abstract

Title: The rationality of public poor relief. A genealogy of the work strategy under capitalism

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Through a genealogical examination of how public poor relief was problematized in Sweden 1847–1875, this thesis aims to outline the assumptions and premises that underlies the contemporary predominant neoliberal argument that public relief needs to be made harder to access in order to restore the so-called “work strategy” (arbetslinjen). A second objective is to identify how conditions for public poor relief were regulated, problematized and legitimized in relation to (wage) labour in Sweden, and to detect how poor relief was handled locally in the municipality of Gothenburg during the middle of the 19th century, a period when industrial capitalism was on the rise. For this reason, the thesis aims to identify the rationality of poor relief in relation to able-bodied poor during this period, which in turn makes it possible to scrutinize its ascendance with the early 21st century’s discourse of activation, labour and relief.

The empirical material comprises three types of sources: (1) printed texts on “the social question”, by priests, scholars, philosophers etc. published 1847–1872; (2) parliamentary documents that considered eligibility for public poor relief (including the poor acts of 1847, 1853 and 1871 respectively) and (3) documents from the archives of the poor board in Gothenburg 1848–1875. The empirical material is subjected to a genealogical analysis where the main focal points are how arguments regarding allegedly threatening aspects of the consequences of poor relief were constructed. The theoretical perspectives that dominate the analysis are partly Karl Marx’ critique of the political economy, partly Michel Foucault’s studies on discipline and governmentality.

The analysis shows that the debate on pauperism in the middle of the 19th century, following the approval of the first Swedish national Poor Act in 1847, included launching a radical critique of poor relief. In the parliament as well as in the studied literature, public poor relief was constructed as threatening the needs of the nascent liberalized labour market. It was argued that recipients of relief developed misguided desires, laziness, carelessness and criminal tendencies. In order to temper the production of these flaws, and instead contribute to poor peoples’ adoption of desired characteristics (industriousness, frugality and acceptance of hardships), it was claimed that public poor relief required to be designed in a way that achieved this. The main element to be induced into the relationship between relievers and relieved was the categorical condition of compensations in the shape of forced work. The poor board in Gothenburg was fully aware of the dominant discourse of relief and argued that it was cautious not to support able-bodied poor. Nonetheless the records show that the board did support able-bodied poor, but treated them more harshly, assuming that this would equip the paupers with industriousness. The board was constantly in conflict with “competing” relief providers, such as philanthropic organizations and local inhabitants giving alms to beggars. The board’s main argument was that these providers were not careful enough in their examinations of the supplicants’ needs.

The discourse of workfare, which characterizes the early 21st century policies in Sweden, bears a close resemblance to how poor relief was problematized in the middle of the 19th century. With regards to the problematization, poor relief (or welfare) is said to produce more misery than it reduces, mainly because of the “dependency culture” it is portrayed as instilling. Relief is claimed as a producer of vices such as laziness and carelessness, which in the end could lead to antisocial and criminal tendencies. The remedies are also more or less the same: plug up the access to relief and condition relief with compensations.