

Designing Democracy: The UTOPIA-project and the Role of the Nordic Labor Movement in Technological Change during the 1970s and 1980s

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Introduction

- Computer-based wave of rationalization in 1970s coincided with the economic recession
- Occupational groups feared they would lose control over their work and eventually their job
- “microelectronics revolution” changed the work of graphic workers
- In the U.S. and the UK many of them lost their jobs
 - Counter-strategies from organized labor were Ludditian, i.e. characterized by resistance towards technological change

Introduction

- The responses articulated by the labor movement in the Nordic countries developed along a different path
 - Technological optimism
 - Developing technology on the premises of the workers
 - Organizing themselves *with* the help of technology rather than *against* technology

Introduction

- The differing contexts key explanation
- Two contextual factors will be considered:
 - Technological optimism
 - A strong labor movement striving for industrial democracy
- Other factors:
 - Specific Scandinavian/Nordic values and traits
 - The distinctive character of the Graphic Workers Union
 - The radicalization of the universities in the 1960s and 1970s

The Labor Movement and Technology

- A joint labor movement program in 1944
- *Tekniken och morgondagens samhälle* (Technology and the Society of Tomorrow, 1956)
- The inevitability of technological progress
- Technology determined social change
- Overall strategy: “total adaptation”
- The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (LO) adopted a “rationalization friendly approach”

The Labor Movement and Technology

- Things changed in late 1960s and early 1970s:
Technology changed from a promise to a threat
- The inevitability of technology was questioned
- Technology is political!
- Choosing technology, choosing future
- But: still a strong belief in technology shaping society

The Labor Movement and Technology

- A strong labor movement expanded its ambitions from wage negotiations into changing work organization and eventually technology:
 - The Trade Union Confederation's Advisory Committee for Computing (LO:s dataråd) in 1976
 - The Workers' Educational Association (ABF) held courses on the role of computers in social change
 - The Social Democratic Party presented an action program on computers and politics in 1979
 - Tage Erlander's Computer Symposium in 1980
- Trade unions should take command over technological change

Industrial Democracy

- Saltsjöbaden Agreement in 1938 between the Trade Union Confederation and the Employers' Confederation => the “Swedish Model”
- 1970s: a powerful labor movement carried out legislations that strengthened the employees' position (in private companies)
- The Codetermination Act (MBL) in 1976
- Similar developments in Norway and Denmark

Industrial Democracy

- The Swedish Center for Working Life (ALC) established by the Parliament in 1976
 - Financed by the Work Environment Fund, through a wage tax paid by all employers
- Among ALC's aims: to “promote democracy in working life”
- Three big projects on technology and organization: DEMOS, UTOPIA and FRONT

Industrial Democracy

- Summing up: in the 1970s and the first half of 1980s, powerful trade unions made attempts to realize the old dream of industrial democracy
- Governmental decisions strengthened the unions: new legislations and institutions established
- A state-supported complex voiced the demands of the labor movement

Conclusion

- UTOPIA-project:
 - aimed at alternative goals (compared with industry) such as translating social values regarding job skills, quality of work and quality of products into hardware and software for the graphic industries (technological optimism)
 - Can be seen as an attempt to realize the old dream of industrial democracy by designing computing technology