

# Learning democracy in a Swedish gamers' association: Representative democracy as experiential knowledge in a liquid civil society

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## Abstract

*To explore the role of civil society organizations in learning democracy this article combines the concept of democracy as 'phronēsis' with neo-institutional theory, as well as with Hannah Pitkin's concepts of representation. It presents a case study (based on qualitative research) of how democracy is learned in SVEROK, a Swedish youth organization focusing on activities such as computer and role-playing games, activities often associated with informal organization. In SVEROK they are organized in an organization sharing many features with established Swedish organizations, including hierarchic formal representative democracy. The norm in SVEROK is a pragmatic organizational knowledge focusing on substantive and formal representation. Organized education plays only a limited role. Learning is typically informal and experience-based. An organization similar to earlier national organizations is created by self-organized and self-governing associations in government-supported cooperation. The case study supports Theda Skocpol's argument that organizational structure is vital to democratic learning.*

**Keywords:** phronesis; Sweden; civil society; democracy; learning

## Introduction

In both scholarly and political discourses about democracy and civil society, the organizations of civil society have often been described as a school for democracy and active citizenship. Almost as often, they have also been described as a vital ingredient in a democratic society which is now threatened by increasing individualism and commercial media taking over from more community-inducing interests and leisure activities, such as sports and choir singing, especially among young people (e.g. Putnam, 2000; Pitkin, 2004; Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, 2007). These

ideas can both be questioned and developed. The research of Theda Skocpol (2003) emphasizes the importance of organizational types in determining the influence of civil society on democracy (in contrast to Putnam's focus on social capital). 'Democracy' can mean many things, and the question of what kind of democracy – if any – is learned in civil society has many answers. If the type of organization is important, then much of the previous research on the connection between civil society and democracy can also be questioned from the fact that both the U.S. and organizations in the social sector have been overrepresented in it so far, and research on civil society is now increasingly revealing differences in the structure of civil society in different countries and between different sectors of society (Kendall, 2010; Zimmer & Evers, 2010).

This article presents a case study of Sweden's largest youth organization SVEROK (Sverok, Sveriges Roll- och Konfliktspelsförbund, the Swedish Role Playing and Conflict Gaming Federation), an organization with around 100,000 members<sup>1</sup> that focuses on activities such as computer games and role-playing games. As such, it contains an empirical case relevant to understand how democracy is learned in contemporary youth organizations, in a context that has not been previously researched. In approaching this material, I will use the Aristotelian concepts of knowledge as *phronēsis*, *epistēmē* and *technē* (Aristotle, 1996; Gustavsson, 2000, 2004) combined with neo-institutional analysis (cf. Skocpol, 2003; March & Olsen, 1989; Czarniawska, 2006; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2001), a combination that I hope will enrich both fields. To further discuss the relationship between civil society organizations (CSOs) and macro-level democracy, I will highlight the contrast between the approaches of Putnam and Skocpol. To identify which kind of democracy those active in SVEROK learn, I will use the concepts of *formal*, *symbolic* and *substantive* representation adapted for this purpose from the work of Hannah Pitkin (1972, 2004).

The purpose of this article is to describe the democracy that is learned by those active in SVEROK, focusing on the type of knowledge this constitutes, the views of democracy and representation it includes; and the implications of this case study to the further understanding of the relationship between CSOs and democracy with regards to learning democratic citizenship.

## Civil society and democracy in theory

The concept of *phronēsis* as used here has its roots in Aristotle's description of the practical knowledge of politics learned by political activity in the *polis*. It includes not only skills, but also values, and carries the implication that these are not separable in this type of knowledge. *Phronēsis* in the political context of the *polis* can be explained as the knowledge necessary for the *praxis* of making and executing political decisions and judgments. It can be contrasted to theoretical knowledge, *epistēmē*, as more practical, but also to *technē*, the practical, not value-laden, experiential knowledge of artisans (Aristotle, 1996; Gustavsson, 2000, 2004). In line with this, I will, in this article view organizations as based on the often taken-for-granted behavioral and cognitive norms accepted by those active in them and in their immediate organizational surroundings (March & Olssen, 1989). Being active in an organization is thus seen as a learning process that includes learning not only theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) but also practical knowledge (*phronēsis*), including both competence and values. This learning includes both experience (*phronēsis*) and formal training (*epistēmē*). The emphasis may vary between organizations (cf. March & Olssen, 1989; Gustavsson, 2000, 2004, 2009).

It has been a common assumption at least since Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* was published in 1835, that a civil society and independent associations are important features in a democracy. According to Tocqueville, one of the chief benefits of such associations was that citizens active in them got the experience of common self-rule, and thus both, a knowledge of it, and a taste for it (Taylor, 1995; Tocqueville, 2003). One interpretation of this is given by the philosopher Charles Taylor: 'if they are to be real loci of self-government [associations] have to be nongigantic and numerous' (Taylor, 1995, pp. 222-223), so that a large proportion of the population may gain the benefit of participating in this self-rule. A similar conclusion (although less focused on learning) can be drawn from Putnam's concept of *social capital* built from meaningful interpersonal contact. From Putnam's perspective, the relevance of civil society to democracy is based on who we interact with. The function of associations in this context is that they introduce people of different backgrounds and thereby connect different parts of the population. This creates an emphasis on micro-level activities such as, for example, bowling clubs (Putnam, 2000). According to Putnam, the high levels of activity in civil society in Sweden make this country an example of a strong democracy with a high level of social capital (Putnam, 2002).

This perspective can be contrasted to the perspective presented by Skocpol (2003), whose approach to Tocqueville is quite different. She focuses on experience rather than on personal contact. She argues that the large federate associations which had begun to dominate American civil society at the time of Tocqueville not only taught democracy in general, but did so by enabling those active in them to learn a specific form of nationwide representative democracy. The various levels of a federate organization provided a mirror image of the local communities, counties, states and federal structures of the American state. It also gave active members an experience of representing their local association on higher levels of the organizations' federal structure, thus gaining direct experience important for understanding and participating in political activities. Here the emphasis is on institutional and organizational structure, on representative democracy and on experiencing the values and practices of an organization. If associations are, as Taylor says 'nongigantic and numerous', then the experience would be gained by many more. This would be an experience of self-government, and possibly of direct democracy, not the experience of representative government and policy-making in a large organization.

To describe how choices of representatives are legitimized in the representative democracy of SVEROK, I will use the concepts *formal*, *symbolic* and *substantive representation*, concepts adapted from Pitkin (1972, 2004; Guo & Musso, 2007). A benefit of this approach is that it describes democracy and representation in generalized terms rather than focusing on the particulars of SVEROK as a community of practice. *Formal representation* builds on a system of rules. If the relevant rules are followed, representation is legitimate. Such rules may or may not include provisions for accountability in relation either to rules and to the constituency that has elected the representative. *Symbolic representation* can be exemplified by proportional representation of various groups of people. If a group is made present in this way the group in which it has been made present gains legitimacy from the point of view of symbolic representation. While this can include a sense of responsibility, this form of representation includes no accountability (cf. Bellier & Wilson, 2000). *Substantive representation*, finally, refers to the ability of the representative to represent his or her constituency, taking into account both the personal ability of the representative and the extent to which the context in which he or she is representing it enables him or her to do this well. However, as Pitkin (2004) has pointed out, representative democracy is not

the only kind of democracy, and concepts of representation can thus also be contrasted to direct democracy.

According to Skocpol (2003) civil society is now changing in ways that can be described in Pitkin's terms as a change in emphasis from formal to (in the best cases) symbolic representation of citizens – now no longer members – by CSO representatives. Nationwide federate CSOs are being replaced by a civil society composed of a network of small, often professional, associations. While the representatives of the old associations were elected representatives produced by a membership-based hierarchical internal democracy on which they depended as a base of power and legitimacy, the new civil society is represented by CSO employees that move from organization to organization and depend primarily on public and private financiers. The experience of participating in the government of national organizations governed by representative democracy is now increasingly replaced by professionals and activists acting as symbolic representatives. This professionalization of civil society also implies an increased emphasis on formal training or education, either within or outside of CSOs (Svedberg, Essen & Jegermalm, 2010), thus favoring *epistēmē* rather than *phronēsis* (cf. Gustavsson, 2000, 2004).

Putnam (2000) gave us an image of a future where people do not associate, but instead stay passive in front of their TV and computer screens, which would threaten the legitimacy of nation-state democracy in the eyes of a constituency unable to connect to it and thus not expecting it to be able to represent their interests (substantive and symbolic representation). Skocpol, instead, focuses on the lack of interest groups able to provide substantive representation and in which citizens could learn to act as representatives. Other researchers point to the current development of an informally organized civil society where new social movements and leisure activities organize as networks rather than in established hierarchical modes of organization (Castells, 1996), and where cultural activities – in a broad sense of the word – develop in networks of fans and bloggers into a new participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006). These trends have also been observed in Sweden (Nordvall, 2008; National Youth Board, 2011). From Putnam's perspective, this ought to appear hopeful for the legitimacy of representative democracy. From Skocpol's view, such modes of organization may point towards direct democracy, but they also support her picture of a representative democracy in CSOs threatened by increasing individualism.

From both perspectives, Sweden and SVEROK is a relevant case for examination. Putnam (2002) sees Sweden as a positive example due to its high level of CSO-membership and government support of communal leisure activities, and considers mediatization as a threat to civil society. There have indeed been changes in the organizational structure of Swedish civil society. Historically, civil society in Sweden has been dominated by large federate organizations known as *folkrörelser* or popular movement organizations (PMOs). Such organizations are characterized by an open membership, a high number of members, an internal democracy based on these features, and a federal structure covering the Swedish territory with several levels including local clubs, regional districts and a national level, and are thus similar to the federate associations described by Skocpol. The Swedish Labor movement can be seen as an ideal-typical case of a popular mass movement in this sense. The temperance movement and the non-conformist churches are also commonly referred to as classical examples of such popular movements. After the democratization of Swedish politics, they have been closely connected to – and supported by – the state in arrangements often described as corporative. As in many other countries, youth organizations have played an important role in learning democracy in civil society. In spite of the term 'popular movement

organizations', associations organized in this way also include many which are not engaged primarily in changing society, but rather focusing on leisure activities (Amnå, 2007; Harding, 2011; Hvenmark, 2008; Wijkström & Lundström, 2002; Rothstein & Trägårdh, 2007; Trägårdh, 2007), much as leisure activities, such as for example sports and amateur culture, constitute a significant part of civil society in many other European countries (Zimmer & Ewers, 2010). Some of these organizations now face decreasing membership numbers, again in parallel to Skocpol. However, the tendency to volunteer for non-profit work in CSOs has not decreased significantly in the last two decades (Svedberg et al, 2010).

## Methods

In order to capture both the experiences of individual elected representatives, and the context of discussions and decision making processes in SVEROK, this article is based on a qualitative interpretation of several kinds of sources, including written sources, notes from participant observations, a questionnaire, and qualitative interviews (notes and recordings), of which the last mentioned are the most important part of the material (cf. Czarniawska, 2007). Written sources include information material from SVEROK (such as its journal over the years 1990-2010<sup>2</sup>), as well as proceedings of meetings and material from its Internet forum (SVEROK, 2010a).

Semi-structured qualitative interviews have been made with fourteen persons who are, or have been, elected representatives on different levels in the organization, one of whom was at the time employed by it, and two of whom also have experience of cooperating with it as representatives of other organizations. One additional interview was made with an employee of a study association of which SVEROK is a member. Participant observations (Czarniawska, 2007) have been made at the annual congresses of SVEROK in 2009 and 2010, at that of SVEROK Stockholm in 2010 and at a weekend get-together for representatives of the SVEROK districts in the spring of 2009. During the 2009 national congress, a questionnaire was answered by those present.<sup>3</sup> The interviews and observations have been central to the study in the sense that other sources such as statutes, published material and web-material have been interpreted in the light of the explanations given in interviews and in the context of the observations. At the same time, they have also been used as context to the interpretation of these sources. This method can be described as ethno-hermeneutic (Bjurström, 2004). Each source is used to better understand earlier findings. Quotations used in this article are chosen as illustrations of thoughts and norms that are more commonly occurring in the empirical material. These quotes have been translated into English by the author. During this process, quotes from interviews and field notes have been adjusted to written language.

## Representative democracy in SVEROK and representation as a learning

### experience

Like most Swedish youth organizations, SVEROK follows the established model of the PMOs, i.e. it has a hierarchical representative democracy with local associations, districts and a national organization based on open membership. Computer and web-based games are among the activities that in Sweden are most often presented as

alternatives to those organized by CSOs (e.g. Ministry of Integration and Gender Equality, 2007; National Youth Board, 2011). Most of the activities organized in SVEROK are often associated with the organizational forms of what has been described as a *network society* (Castells, 1996), or *liquid society* (Bauman, 2000). In SVEROK these activities are organized in an association sharing several distinctive features with the old Swedish popular movements and their youth organizations. This apparent paradox suggests that neither the young people of today, nor these new leisure activities, are as incompatible with established forms of organization as is often expected.

My most significant participant observation took place in November 20-22, 2009. SVEROK's annual national congress (*Riksmötet*) was gathering in a borrowed auditorium. About 150 people were gathered in the room: the 101 elected representatives, as well as reserves, functionaries and guests. Most of those present appeared to be under 30 years old, many under 20 (only 15 of the elected representatives were above 30), and a majority of them male (29 of the elected representatives women), but the percentage of females among the representatives was still much higher than among the organization's members in general (8.5 %). One of the first things to happen at the gathering was all 150 persons present lining up towards the rostrum to present themselves with name, member association (if applicable), and favourite game, so that everyone would already be done with their initial address (field notes, information from SVEROK<sup>4</sup>).

The 101 representatives had all been elected in a national election that finished 50 days earlier. All member associations have the right to vote, but have different numbers of votes, ranging from one to eight, depending of their number of individual members. All individual members have the right to nominate candidates (SVEROK, 2009). This stands in some contrast to most Swedish PMOs, in which each district appoints a number of representatives (depending on its number of individual members) to the national congress (Hvenmark, 2008). The system used in SVEROK is highly formalized and considered legitimate by the elected representatives primarily with reference to the fact that formal rules have been followed (interviews). In interviews with elected representatives this system was explained to me as a combination of legitimacy based on individual members and on member-associations. The fact that representatives, due to the practice of secret elections, do not know who has voted for them, creates an openness for interpretation in their view of the constituency they represent, an openness not promoted by the system used in most Swedish CSOs.

While SVEROK may appear similar in organizational structure to the ideal-typical PMO (cf. Hvenmark, 2008; Wijkström & Lundström, 2002), there are significant differences in the organizational structure. While the districts and the national level correspond to geographical areas, the local associations do not necessarily do so. A local association may be a small group of young people who meet up on a regular basis to play a role-playing game, a group organizing a major event (such as a live-action game or a computer-gamer gathering), or even a group of thousands of people regularly contributing to an Internet community. Rather than the established form with one association per geographical area, SVEROK consist of a large and ever-changing number of associations often organized when needed for specific activities, but also including some that are long-lived and function in a more traditional manner. While not necessarily long-lived, all of these groups are at least formally speaking democratically organized (interviews, statistics from SVEROK). This is possible thanks to the fact that SVEROK has greatly simplified the founding and managing of a non-profit association as a process. Template statutes are available on the Internet (SVEROK, 2009, 2010a), ready-made to be completed with club name and location, as are instructions for

administrative routines, how to hold board and member meetings and what positions of trust to elect. Using Aristotelian terminology, this kind of learning can be described as *epistêmê*, theoretical learning transmitted by generalizing, in this case legal, manuals. The neo-institutional literature speaks of packaged concepts, i.e. practices translated into objectified theoretical concepts intended to be translated once more – unpacked – into practices in a different context (Harding, 2011; Røvik, 2008). Since SVEROK associations are founded much more frequently than associations in most PMOs, such manuals come into play far more often. This is a minimum democracy and knowledge of democracy required by SVEROK (2009).

At the annual congress of 2009, as many as 27 of the 101 elected representatives were present for the first time (questionnaire), and many had only very limited experience of representative democracy. Others were much more experienced, and a few had been present at most of the organization's congresses since its founding in 1988. Now they were all gathered as the highest decision-making body of the largest youth organization in Sweden. A majority of the delegates answered in a questionnaire that they were there to 'influence [the organization] at large'; however 'to see friends' was also a common response. The introductions were followed by a weekend of debates, both in plenum and in smaller groups, and concerning everything from office locations to internal elections, often interrupted by lengthy discussions on procedural issues and constantly shadowed by a parallel debate via the participants' computers on the organization's chat forum (field notes, questionnaire, interviews). Descriptions of the formal proceedings are provided over the Internet before the congress and preliminary discussions take place on the organization's website (SVEROK, 2010a).

A central value when procedures were discussed by the congress was that everyone has to have equal opportunity to make their voice heard (interviews, field notes, SVEROK, 2010a). In one interview this even came up as a definition of democracy: 'that everyone gets to say their part' (interview: former board member). While this view may be extreme as a definition, it appears to be commonly viewed as a central value in any democracy that should at least be a part of a definition. Together with a meeting culture that promotes compromise and open discussions, this can be seen as an ingredient of a deliberative democracy (cf. Habermas, 1996) which appears to be taken for granted as a central value in SVEROK, a value which presupposes the fact that delegates are free to negotiate. It can, as we shall see, be connected to modes of organization on all levels. It is one of the few requirements made on local clubs that they should be open to everyone who wishes to join, and does not actively counteract the purpose of the association (e.g. disrupting activities may lead to loss of membership). In theory, everyone can thus join and everyone has a right to speak and be heard. These are fundamental values that appear as taken-for-granted norms in this organization (which is not to say that practices always live up to this ideal).

Since organizational experience varies strongly among the delegates, informal learning, where the less experienced ask the more experienced for advice, plays an important role in learning both skills and values, as does learning by imitation. Formal procedures are also explained to the delegates both in plenum and in text distributed to them. Judging from observations and interviews, the congress as well as other meetings of representatives (including the merely social) forms learning experiences as well as contexts of decision-making.

In terms of decision-making, the congress may be even more important than in more traditional organizations, insofar as very little appears to be decided in advance. Delegates have remarkably free hands both in relation to the constituencies that they represent and in relation to the proposals presented to them; 'Almost all motions are

changed' (interview: vice chairman). In this sense, the congress is more like a parliament without parties than the meetings of representatives of various districts that usually govern a PMO.

Exceptions exist however. In 2009 at least one member association with several representatives held these accountable to the decisions of a pre-meeting with their own members (field notes, phone interview: delegate). The open interpretation of constituencies is thus used to create a representation based on accountability made possible by the fact that the proceedings are open to observation.

However, the dominant priority is that of formal and substantive representation; correctly elected representatives taking responsibility for representing the interests of a perceived constituency within a formally regulated framework. In many cases this included traces of symbolic representation, where elected representatives perceived themselves to represent those active in the same hobbies, 'guessing' that these were the ones who voted for them (field notes, interview: national-congress representative). The importance of such identification may be more understandable if we look at the organization at the member-association level.

## **SVEROK at the association level: Associational democracy among networking entrepreneurs**

Judging from observations and interviews, written guidelines for associations are not the main vehicle for learning how to organize member-associations, at least not for those members who represent them at the national level (and are expected to be those with the most experience). More important is the experience of founding and managing an association, often at a very young age. According to one member of the national board (interview), a large part of the SVEROK members, like her, have the experience of 'founding an association', and most of them will see it 'disappear when the original members move or cease to be active'. Even if the formal association is old, most activities are organized by relatively inexperienced members. Most members are very young, and activities are organized without specifically appointed older leaders. Often teenagers end up not only organizing major events, but also managing the legal body behind them. The largest such event so far is likely to be the annual computer gathering Dreamhack, with around 10,000 participants, which had started as an association within the confines of SVEROK, but which has now left the organization (interview: vice chairman; Dreamhack, 2010).

The experience of self-organization is, judging from the material, a major part of SVEROK's self-image. It is vastly different from that of active members in many other organizations. Formal or theoretical education plays only a minor role when SVEROK members learn organizational skills. This is something that in my interviews have been explained by the unavailability of education relevant for democracy and organization in this context. As we have seen, learning among active members of SVEROK instead takes place by practical experience, sometimes following guidelines, or – especially on higher levels and in the more established associations – learning by asking for the advice of more experienced members, or informally discussing democracy with these.

When I ask interviewees what they have learned about democracy, the answer is often an issue of very practical organizational skill, such as for example 'you learn how to lead projects [...] how to lead a board [and how to] make everyone satisfied' (interview: vice chairman) – i.e. organizational leadership skills. These skills (*technê*)



are also connected to values. For example, leading a meeting in a way that makes everyone satisfied includes the ability to enable everyone to feel that not only have their voice been heard, but they are also a part of the team. This mastering of this skill in this context is thus closely connected to valuing inclusive discussions. Another norm expressed in the same interview is that administrative work and leadership roles, associated with boards and elected representatives, should not be distant from the activities and those who participate or volunteer in them: 'the associations are a natural part of the activities, [not something] up there'. With this in mind, it is hardly surprising that representatives at the congress identify alternatively with their own associations or with the hobby, or 'branch of the hobby', that they are active in, apparently without conflict.

During a semi-formal discussion on visions for the future, one member of a district board explained the driving motive for her own volunteer work as 'a kind of feeling that it is actually possible to do something, to support all this fantastic energy' (field notes), i.e. the activity and creativity of others in their common hobby. The keyword in a vision for SVEROK ought, according to her, to be 'possibility' – in the sense of the possibility for everyone, including fifteen-year-olds – to create their own associations and activities. This view appears to be common in the organization. It is, however, noticeable how it almost immediately turns pragmatic. Possibility means enabling and supporting with resources. Most of the SVEROK budget goes to supporting local associations with money taken out of the government grants for the organization (SVEROK, 2010b, pp. 14-16). This, too, is a very strong norm: that the government grants are for the members' activities organized on the association level, not for the national organization as such. Equally strong is the norm that both work and decisions should be made by members and volunteers. This is another common norm for PMOs, but while many other organizations are, as mentioned above, increasingly professionalized, SVEROK has comparatively few employees, less than 15 in the entire organization (SVEROK, 2010a).

Conversely, the motivations for volunteer work are very similar – if not identical – to those in other organizations. Johan von Essen (2008) has identified (by qualitative interviews) three main characteristics in what volunteers in three Swedish CSOs considered voluntary (Swe: *ideellt*) work: it is not made for monetary payment, not forced, and results in meaningful positive consequences for someone else. The volunteers interviewed by von Essen appear to define voluntary work in contrast to professional work, which they considered to be done for the sake of monetary payment. Voluntary work is done, if not for its own sake, then for the sake of others and for less tangible motives, such as a sense of accomplishment, a feeling that will, according to von Essen's respondents, only appear if the motive is not tangible pay and the work voluntary (which is not to say that that professional work cannot be enjoyed or lead to a sense of accomplishment, but rather that they did not consider this to be its primary purpose). According to recent studies, 60 % of Swedish volunteers start volunteering in order to do something for the organization, and 57 % to do something for other people (Svedberg et al, 2010).

Volunteering primarily to do something for the organization appears to be an unlikely reason in the case in SVEROK, an organization which is constantly discussing the problem of making their members aware of its existence as a national organization. While identification with member associations may be stronger, my interviews suggest that these, too, are considered mere instruments to organize and provide resources, and that it is the hobby activities themselves that are considered the purpose of the voluntary work put into them. However, this is not unique to SVEROK; 55 % of the CSO

volunteers in a recent national study (Svedberg et al, 2010) claimed to have started doing volunteer work in order to participate in a leisure activity. In SVEROK it is the norm to claim that 'it is fun' as the main reason for often extensive volunteer work. Enabling others to have the same opportunity also makes an appearance as a motive, especially among those who are most active. The contrast between on the one hand voluntary activities and work, and on the other hand school, other formal education and paid work, also appears to be relevant in SVEROK.

When voluntary work becomes more administrative than hobby-related, the norm in SVEROK appears to be to claim that organizational work itself is a fun activity, often with some sense of self-irony, conscious of how odd this may seem to those who don't share the experience. These activists approach the Aristotelian view of politics as an intrinsically valuable activity (Aristotle, 1996; Arendt, 1998) more closely than those in the established PMOs. In SVEROK, the ability to do or accomplish something, or to help others doing that – 'to realize dreams' (field notes) – appears to be the major experience that drives on to further volunteer work at regional and national levels, or in other organizations. A former SVEROK representative, who has since moved on to other organizations, described this during a lecture on how to become more democratically active, as 'a feeling of flow, or of being swept away': 'When I was thirteen years old I just wanted to start a club for computer gaming [...] when we were three, four, hundred people I couldn't sit and play computer games, because then I was the chairman, a person with responsibility' (interview: national-congress representative).

### Organizational learning as *phronēsis*

SVEROK appears to be a hybrid between a new (part of) civil society and the older concept of PMOs. The new networked civil society may appear liquid (cf. Bauman, 2000) and in a constant state of flux. SVEROK appears to be able to provide strong experiences of self-rule similar to those described by Taylor (1995) and Tocqueville (2003), as well as the experiential learning of representative democracy that Skocpol (2003) described in the large federal associations of the USA. As a national association, SVEROK appears to be the result of a model for government grants which has supported the creation of organizational levels in which representative democracy can be experienced. These in turn support the more liquid associations that appear and disappear in the hobby communities which SVEROK organizes (Harding, 2011). This combination is likely a result of the meeting between the specific features of Swedish civil society (and state support for civil society) and current global developments in technology (e.g. computer games) and leisure activities. It shows that the current trends in civil society do not necessarily lead to a destruction of the foundation for all CSOs, but may also lead to the creation of new ones, especially in a national context favorable to this.

The experiential knowledge of organizational processes gained in SVEROK is not merely one of an idealized democracy, but rather one of being able to realize ideas by practical action, one based in the experience of gathering funds for events and organizing them: a combination of idealism and pragmatism focusing on moving forward and making something happen. As implied by the Greek term *phronēsis*, this practical knowledge also includes values: not only is it normatively appropriate to act and make things happen (activity as its own reward), it is also assumed that official channels (such as municipal authorities responsible for youth projects) work well

enough to be influenced, but not well enough to not need to be influenced. This implies the presence of some of the trust in society that Putnam (2000) thought was dying out. This combination of pragmatism and passion, however, may not be new to SVEROK or to late-modern civil society. A similar view was formulated by Max Weber in his classical description of the logic of politics, formulated in Weimar-era Germany:

We can say that three qualities, above all, are of a decisive importance for a politician: passion, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of proportion. ...For the heart of the problem is how to forge a unity between hot passion and a cool sense of proportion in the same person (Weber, 2004, p. 77).

The passion is certainly there among those active in SVEROK. While outsiders might consider the passion for a hobby such as gaming to be out of proportion, the proportion that Weber considered necessary for politics is often there, namely the pragmatic sense necessary for winning limited victories by negotiation and compromise with a sense of responsibility as the central value, rather than accomplishing nothing by sticking to principle. This is also part of a practical value-laden knowledge (*phronēsis*) of politics that can be learned by experience, but which is also rather far from the theoretical knowledge (*epistēmē*) of democracy that may be more easily learned in school, but which 'you do not connect to what you do in everyday life' (interview: vice chairman). If this is so, the trick to learn democracy is to make it a part of everyday life.

The experience of flow and activity described above does not automatically translate into a given conclusion concerning the usefulness of the established democratic form, or even of the form currently used in SVEROK. Most of the opinions that I have encountered fall somewhere in the middle between two ideal-typical ends of a spectrum. One is the rejection of the association as a form of organization in favor of more informal modes of organizing; a 'democracy' espousing the norm that everyone (involved) should have their say but recognizing a right of those who volunteer to decide what they will do, a somewhat anarchistic view that is described by writers with a background in games organizing as espousing the values of network society and participatory culture (Haggren, Larsson, Nordwall & Widing, 2008; cf. Jenkins, 2006). From this perspective, formal democracy as prescribed by the established norms for associations appears restrictive to the creativity that the central norm is to support: it is 'not reasonable to have an association...associations are about creating continuity, associations are about administration, live-action role-playing games are about letting loose, about expending, losing your time and your resources [to create a common experience]' (interview: event organizer). At the other end of the spectrum are those who have accepted the idea of formal organization as the way to create democracy, thus accepting the formal practices of representative democracy rather than of project organizing as intrinsically connected to the positive value of democracy. This end of the spectrum can be exemplified by the project VoteIT in which the national level of SVEROK supported the development of programming to enable large Internet-based member associations to more easily hold formally correct meetings on the Internet (interviews, SVEROK, 2010a).

## Conclusion

Contrary to what one might expect from a relatively newly organized CSO dealing with relatively new leisure activities, including computer games, SVEROK is a federate organization based on hierarchical representative democracy, an organization much like

those that Skocpol described as declining, and similar to the older Swedish PMOs. However, a closer look shows an organization that has emerged as an interface between the government's support-systems and an emerging network-based civil society created by medialization and globalization. As such, SVEROK represents an adaptation of the state-supported structure of the popular movement youth-organization to a new context in which the member-associations provide a legal and organizational framework for activities emerging in a network. This may also explain why the expected trend from volunteer to professional organization is not noticeable in SVEROK, an organization with around 100,000 members, most of whom are likely to be active members, and less than 15 employees. The differences between new and old types of organization appear more diffuse than expected in official discourse.

Learning from organized teaching appears to play a very limited role in SVEROK. Rather than by *epistêmê*, learning among those active in the organization is dominated by learning via experience, and can thus be characterized as either *phronēsis* or *technê*. Judging from my interviews and observations, the knowledge of acting as a representative in a democracy that is learned by them largely consists of practices learned by experience simultaneously with their normative implications (*phronēsis*).

What views on democratic representation is it then that those active in SVEROK learn? Representation in SVEROK is primarily legitimized as formal representation, which can be seen as a minimum requirement to achieve legitimacy in contexts such as the national congress, but also extend to a preoccupation with rules that characterized the procedures. Symbolic representation also plays a part, especially in how representatives view their responsibility. The role of accountability is, on the other hand, relatively limited, especially with regard to the representatives to the congress who are formally accountable to no one and free to define their own sense of responsibility to their constituency. Substantive representation in the sense of representation of interests appears to be a dominant view of the responsibility of the representative, especially with regard to board members. In relation to Swedish CSOs in general, it appears that SVEROK has a higher emphasis on formal representation, while the emphasis on representation of interests is much more in line with the tradition of the popular movements.

Like in all forms of *phronēsis*, practical democratic knowledge mixes values and skills. As can be expected when dealing with experiential knowledge, everyone active in SVEROK do not appear to support this representative democracy, some instead arguing more anarchic network-oriented views on organization. However, in the context of the national congress, support for the ruling representative democracy was consensual. Those who have held different views among those I have interviewed, were referring to their experience as event organizers or founders of associations on the local level instead, having only brief impressions of the more formal representative democracy of the national level and more formally organized member-associations, thus having gained only some of the necessary skills (*technê*) for this and *epistêmê* – including both practices and norms – in a somewhat different context. Both groups share the view of the experience of being active as an intrinsically positive value, an idea that appears to be consensual in the entire organization.

What then is the relationship between this CSO and democracy with regards to learning democratic citizenship? It appears that those active in SVEROK gain *phronēsis* of how to act as representatives in a representative democracy, including a specific view of what that representation entails, a view that is similar to that provided by more typical PMOs, if somewhat more individualistic than these. The democratic knowledge learned by participants appears to be one of pragmatic knowledge of politics and

organization reminiscent of the perspective that Weber described among politicians acting in the context of a representative democracy, gained in a way similar to how Aristotle expected political knowledge to be learned by experience of political activity in the *polis*. Whether the *phronēsis* gained in more typical PMOs is similar to this is something that requires further research to answer.

The experiential knowledge gained by activity in SVEROK is likely to strengthen their ability to act in a representative democracy, and also as organizational entrepreneurs in other contexts. Enabling a larger portion of the citizenry to gain such knowledge is, according to both Skocpol and Tocqueville, a central democratic function of civil society. However, it should be noted that this *phronēsis* would not have been the same in an organizational context of pure network character as in this context influenced by a neo-corporatist state to adopt a form closer the more traditional federate type.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> In 2020 SVEROK claimed 120,000 members (SVEROK, 2010a). In the records of The National Youth Board 86,847 youth members (7-25 years old) were registered for 2009. In terms of such youth members, SVEROK was the largest youth organization to receive grants from The National Youth Board (information from the National Youth Board). SVEROK's organizational model makes membership in several member associations possible, especially if they engage in different activities.

<sup>2</sup> Published under the following titles *Signalier från Sverok* (1989-1994), *Saga* (1996-1997), *Sverox* (1997-2006) and *Signalier från Sverok* (from 2006).

<sup>3</sup> The questionnaire was handed out to the delegates by SVEROK functionaries. It included both evaluation questions made by SVEROK's national office and questions added on my request. 78 delegates answered the questionnaire. The answers were collected and processed by functionaries and are available in SVEROK's archive. Questions used as a references in this article are (translated) 'How old are you?', 'Are you [a] a guy, [b] a [girl?]' (multiple choice question) and 'Why have you chosen to come to the national congress?'

<sup>4</sup> According to information from SVEROK's central office 8.5 % of all SVEROK members are women, including 7.8 of the youth members (7-25 years old) reported to the National Youth Board (e-mail from SVEROK central office on November 26, 2010). Information regarding the elected representatives is based on information given to SVEROK's national office at registration.

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