

Imperatives for 'Right' Educational Choices in Swedish Educational Policy*

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Abstract

The present article is based on a critical semiotic investigation of the Swedish Long-Term Survey on economic development. It aims to examine how recent Swedish policy trends bring specific economic, political and social processes together to form a system of meaning for both motivation and regulation over individuals' educational choices. What is specifically investigated is how the survey directs attention to shaping actors' wants and decisions in relation to economically productive educational choices through information about education and employment and how education reorganization can redirect economic liabilities from the public to the individual. The particular consequences for educational choices are discussed from the concepts of righteousness, reasonableness and necessity as semantic distinctions that are used to illustrate causal claims on a policy level. The article indicates that these policies rest on apparently categorical ontological and epistemological assumptions on how to direct choices. This appears to be a complexity reduction with the attempt to imply the pre-eminence of economic meaning and motivation for people's decisions in education and social participation.

Keywords: Critical semiotics, educational choice, educational policy, communicative rationality.

Introduction

The purpose of this article is to by means of a critical semiotic investigation of the Swedish Long-Term Survey on economic development (SOU 2008a, 2011a) examine how specific economic, political and social processes are brought together to form *a system of meaning* in Swedish education policy for motivating and regulating individuals' educational choices. Educational choices are in the Long-Term Survey (LTS) described as playing a vitally

important part in how the Swedish economy can be effectively developed in accordance with international economic relations. It is in particular stated that individuals' choice in education has to be directed towards improved economic competitiveness.¹ The *kind* of choices young people currently make is seen as problematic. Firstly, they unduly delay entry into the labor market. Secondly, they are inadequately productive in an international comparison. In particular, attention is directed towards specific forms of knowledge and learning that will direct people's motivations, deliberations and decision-making. Education is seemingly framed within comprehensive shifts in Swedish welfare-policy from de commodification to recommodification and individual self-reliance (Beach, 2008, p. 200, 2010, p. 554; Björnberg, 2012, p. 83; Dovemark, 2004). This transition toward recommodification challenges the social democratic 'Swedish model' of welfare in terms of strong principals of inclusion and limited differentiation between social groups (cf. Esping-Andersen, 1998, p. 69; Lindblad, Lundahl, Lindgren & Zackari, 2002, pp. 299-300). Instead principals of *responsibilization* on the behalf of the individual (cf. Thörn & Larsson, 2012, p. 265) in how a dynamic educational system can be made internationally competitive are made important (cf. Ball, 2007, p. 8). This though at the same time poses a democratic dilemma of social inclusion in the wake of extensive marketization (Arnesen & Lundahl, 2006, pp. 291-292; Lundahl, Erixon Arreman, Lundström, & Rönnerberg, 2010, pp. 49-51), where cognitive, cultural, social and material resources for identifying and making *right* choices have become increasingly important for education success (Beach & Dovemark, 2009, pp. 700-701; Lund, 2006, p. 78).

In this cohesion, choices in education come to play a vital role in both making the individual responsible for social inclusion by making the 'right' choices, and rational in how those choices contribute to individual success or failure. These are processes that have brought significant theoretical and empirical attention to how political governance takes subtle forms when controlling citizens' rationalities and mentalities. They delineate goals in conformity with political objectives (cf. Lemke 2001, pp. 201-202; Rose 1999, p. 17). But the problem of the rationalization and responsibilization of choices can however also be denoted as a more extensive epistemological and ontological concern. This can be examined using critical semiotics from a realist stand in order to unfold the demarcations it poses on human agency.

By utilizing a critical realistic (CR) framework, semiotics is here argued to be a viable tool in not merely understanding the constructions of meaning but also their material and social consequences. These aspects of a critical and realistic approach are mainly influenced by

Jessop (2004), Nellhaus (1998), and Fairclough, Jessop and Sayer (2004), concerning how semiotic symbols can be understood as emergent causal powers if critical attention is turned to how semiotics affects social practices, institutions and the ideologies that influence our conceptions of reality (cf. Bhaskar, 1998a; Elder-Vass, 2010). As Bob Jessop (2004, p. 163) perceptively argues, ideational policy claims with causal 'manipulative power' appear '...sometimes more semiotically, sometimes more materially' when they constitute particular objects of governance.

The particular way in which this article addresses semiotic mediation is by the relational terms of *reasonableness* and *necessity* in how the investigated policy texts constitute desirable educational choices. This is discerned as a mediatory relation that can contribute to a pre-eminent *rightness* of how to shape an education system based on signs of economic exchange. In essence it is about how certain forms of subjectification to social and economic structures are presumed to attain economically productive citizens within a desirable economic system.

The article constitutes thus accordingly an investigation of the particularities in how a cogent rational is developed. Methodologically, this is a matter of making an analytic demarcation of what kind of actor that is dealt with and discerning how choices and decisions can be directed by these demarcations. The ambition has been to unfold by means of a semiotic content analysis of the LTS text how conceptual categories of people's motives and socio-economic preconditions are made consistent. The concerns underlined in the article are consequently on the space provided for a desirable agency. They are addressed by the following research questions:

- Which particular structural conditions become semantically signified as bounding in the LTS for motivating choices and decisions in education?
- How are rationalities and subjectivities constructed in relation to educational choices in the LTS?

When addressing these questions, in the first section, a theoretical demarcation is carried out for how to tackle the interrelation between semiotics and causal powers in a CR framework. The second part deals with the empirical material and methodological concerns for how to understand educational choices in relation to productive outcomes in the labor market in the LTS. In the final section the policy texts and their possible social consequences are discussed.

Critical realism and semiotics

A core issue in the CR approach is that the semiotic dimensions of constructing meaning are related to extra-semiotic conditions in a dialectical relationship that Fairclough et al. (2004, p. 27) and Jessop (2004, pp. 160-163) describe as an interplay between semiotic and material relations in the construction of object and subject. Basically, the point of departure is that policy texts are involved in processes of how people make sense of the world, and those texts, in this perspective also possess causal effects since they influence both the creation of meaning and how society is organized (Fairclough, 2004, pp. 226-227). A basic parameter is that policy is made up of a language that constitutes crucial argumentative aspects of how to distinguish problem-solving and the classification of problems (cf. Majone, 1989, pp. 1-7). Importantly, the argumentative aspects of policy texts can change people's knowledge or opinions. However, the case is also about how semiotics affects the actual structural conditions that precede any form of sense-making.

In terms of addressing policy texts more particularly, a central point of demarcation in this study is essentially made about how certain arguments hinge on the conceptual framing of problems, and subsequently which ideas that guide when to establish shared meaning and motivation for people to act in a certain way (Stone, 1988, pp. 41-42). However, it is also important to note that this is not a routinely directed causality that will change people's knowledge and behavior, or necessarily cause effects on social and material conditions on a regular basis, since changes can occur at one time but not at another (Fairclough, 2004, p. 229). Still, there may be patterns of cause and effect related with a certain type of text. Causality of texts, arguments, and language in general, is accordingly related to several social, cultural, cognitive and/or material context dependent factors. Influences of a policy text are in other words coupled to certain structural systems that provide and signify meaning and coherence (Fairclough, 2004, pp. 229-230; Jessop, 2008, p. 16).

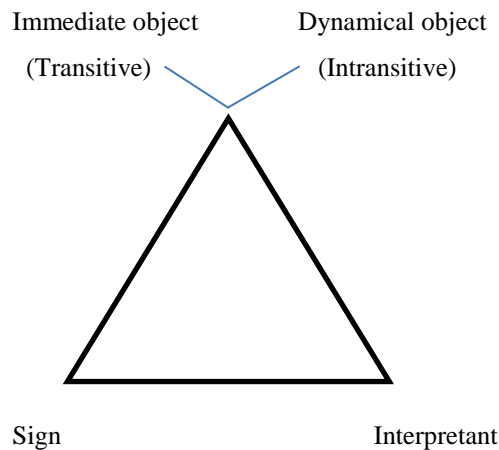
Most fundamental in how a *sign* semantically relates to meaning is the relation between *interpretants* and *objects*. Examples of signs in a semiotic sense can range from texts, symbols, expressions, and include everything that to some extent represents or 'stands for something' (Hawkes, 1977, pp. 126-127). Nonetheless, in order for a sign to refer to something, an interpretant is necessary. An interpretant means someone making sense of signs, attributing meaning, and relating signs to a context of importance. Viewed from this perspective, a sign fills a vital mediating function. It relates objects and interpretants. But the

relationship between signs, their representation, and interpretations in relation to a context of meaning is also a malleable one. Firstly, there is a pre-specified context in which the semiotic mediation takes place, and where all interpretations are already, to some extent, based on previously established semiotic relations. Secondly, this leads the interpretant to be actively involved in an interaction that has a performative dimension, since the relationship between interpretant and signs are a result of previously established actions and thoughts.

Interpreting signs is in other words partly an issue of learning about and adaption toward certain relationships or conditions, since adapting knowledge about circumstances also means relating to certain contexts and conditions that give signs their meaning. What characterizes a CR interpretation of semiotics, as underlined by Fairclough (2004) and Nellhaus (1998), is that the relationship between how a character is obtained and interpreted is supplemented by an extra-semiotic dimension. For example, the interpretation of meaning of a traffic light presupposes a mental and cognitive process, but it also includes material conditions (such as people, vehicles, and traffic lights), legal systems, traffic-planning and entities that are not only semiotic. In other words, for a vehicle to stop at a red light there has to be a comprehensive organization of social practices.

Nellhaus's (1998) application of semiotics largely relies on Charles Peirce interpretations of the interrelation between signs and objects (see e.g. Peirce, 1991, pp. 141-143) but with a main difference in the significance given to ontological and epistemological questions. This can be illustrated by the following model, simplified and slightly modified from Nellhaus (1998, p. 4). In it the object in the figure is divided into two parts. First the 'dynamical object', which is a relatively independent object in relation to the character and interpretation and second an 'immediate object', which consists of people's observations and 'mental images'.

Figure 1. CR interpretation of the semiotic triangulation.



Dynamic and immediate objects in the figure above are here related to the CR distinction of intransitive and transitive domains of reality (Bhaskar, 1978, pp. 21-23; Nellhaus, 1998, p. 6). The transitive dimension is fundamentally an epistemological issue of how knowledge is practiced. It includes theories, observations of objects and phenomena, and categorizations of knowledge. The intransitive dimension is the ontological aspect of structures that constitute reality independently of our understanding and interpretation. The intransitive dimension, however, is not something that we can make claims about in an absolute sense. The reality may be constituted in either one or the other way, but our understanding of it will always be epistemologically limited (Puaca & Daoud, 2009). The point of splitting the object into different strata is based on two principles found in CR.

The first principle is that various types of structures are interrelated, and that they may be relatively distinct in an analytical point. Bhaskar (1998a, p. 15) describes this analytic process mainly in terms as the possibility to ask a focal question: that is ‘... what properties do societies and people possess that might make them possible objects of knowledge for us?’. It is a quest for unfolding what requirement of reality that reasonably must be in play if the nature of objects can determine our cognitive possibilities. The second principle is the concept of emergence, which is a vital dimension in CR and essential in the present analysis. Emergence refers to the relationship between transitive and intransitive dimensions. It can be attributed to the influence both of our images of the real, epistemologically, and it can also have a performative nature concerning how knowledge is practiced.

Emergence is not an easy concept to handle. It represents a methodological and theoretical challenge. But at the heart of the concept there is an ambition to capture aspects of how structures are dependent on but not reducible to other structures for their existence (cf. Bhaskar, 1998b, pp. 599-600; Seldén, 2005, p. 84). Dependences, on the other hand, imply the covariance of structures that change with each other. It is also in this sense that a CR distinction of semiotic objects as transitive and intransitive underlines the interpretants' evaluation of signs as a reproductive relationship to objects. In essence, people's interpretations are in part imposed by structures and in part vital for how structures are maintained. Interpretation is a relation that imposes dependence upon structures unequally, or put in CR terms, it poses inequitable causal powers (cf. Archer, 2003, pp. 132-133).

I think that education in particular makes an illustrative case in point here. As underlined in the influential writings of Bourdieu & Passeron (1977, pp. 54-57), it is hard to distinguish the conception of meaning in education from ideological functions. The educational system presupposes that choices made in and of education are not restricted to intersubjective *wants* (Daoud & Puaca, 2011). In other words, ideology is performative in relation to how ideas and beliefs are formed in a way that tends to sustain relations of domination. Ideology thus excludes the equal representation of various and competing interests within society (cf. Thompson, 1984, p. 79). In Therborn's (1980, p. 18) terms, it qualifies each subject to recognize '*what exists*', '*what is good*', and '*what is possible*'.

Important in this perspective is that ideology is not a neutral concept which connects beliefs to political and social action, but is intrinsically connected to issues of power and domination. The issue of ideology that becomes apparent in this perspective is a constitutive principal of how social actors form their subjectivity in certain contexts and social arrangements. This is however a relation between meaning and power where analytical benefits can be made by investigating the semiotic interpellation of how meaning is both sustained and signified (Fairclough, 2006, p. 25). Especially when espoused in education, the ideological performative aspect of influence over meaning becomes intrinsically apparent in its effect on people's trajectories of what is both possible and desirable to achieve in a societal context (Maclaren, 1989, pp. 178, 192).

Although a controversial and comprehensive term, mainly divided by critical or descriptive distinctions (cf. Eagleton, 1991, ch.1), I will argue that ideology can provide an insightful

contribution about how meaning is transformed on a policy level and reproduced amongst groups or individuals (cf. Boréus, 1999, p. 9). By following Bhaskar's (1998a, pp. 73-74) work, the ideological function is in this case made distinct as an analytical tool that links critical, explanatory and categorical concepts with an emergent causality. This form of reasoning rests on the premises that ideological analyses need theories based on a 'deep ontology' that can critically contextualize the significance of how meaning is expressed within a system of beliefs (for instance policies that enhance recommodification of the welfare system). This is about identifying what Bhaskar (1998a, p. 73) names as the 'incommensurability' of ideologies with *reality*, by pointing out what is left out in the ideological presentation (e.g. reflexive and holistic human subjects). It provides an illustration of which categorical human and societal criteria become focal in the ideological reproduction, but limited from the perspective of a holistic social theory.

However, and utterly important, is the emergent causal powers that these categories might possess since they substitute the frame for how meaning can be transformed. This causality is basically about 'the power to generate a tendency in individuals' to either adopt or observe a norm within a system of meaning (Elder Vass, 2010, pp. 152-153). Such processes of creating meaning are both constraining and enabling in the sense that they close off certain possible perceptions and courses of action, while simultaneously allowing for creative participation within a system. In other words, ideology produces both subjection *to a* given social order and subjects *of a* given social order.

One example that can be relevant in this context is how certain signs of exchange between people and education are conveyed in a meritocratic education system. The meritocratic idea is based on assumptions that an education system best takes advantage of talent through competitive criteria of selection (Goldthorpe, 1997; Johansson, 1998). This so far means that competition represents a fair and democratic education foundation as it uses the outcome of individual talent and diligence so that the most suitable candidates would be chosen (Goldthorpe, 1997, p. 664). For a meritocratic view on education to be possible however a semiotic mediation of signs is required that embraces a specific *reasonableness* - a student with better grades is reasonably better suited for a position than a student with lower grades. This can in turn be related to *necessity*, i.e. good grades are needed to become a successful student. An aspect coming out of this relation is that semiotic mediation involves an emergent effect of the extra-semiotic object preconditioning educational choices. That is, a semiotic

realization among agents (that is to say those agents adopting the reasonableness and necessity in this context) also contributes to an extra-semiotic reproduction of structures (e.g. legislative rules, policy incentives, organizations and government agencies), thus contributing to a certain *rightness* of how we form an educational system. These are structures that can be seen both as material (such as financial aid, admissions processes, and possible educational pathways), and as meaning-making if agents' accordingly are to adopt themselves to available study-paths within an educational system.

LTS and semiotic construction of boundaries

The LTS was commissioned by the Swedish Ministry of Finance with a main objective to 'produce reference data for economic policy and to contribute to the economic policy debate' (<http://www.sweden.gov.se>). It provides analyses and suggestions for the planning of public administration and organizations and economic incentives for businesses and employment. For over 60 years LTS has had a considerable impact on policy concerns ranging from education, employment, development of the Swedish welfare state, municipal and regional development, and incentives for economic restructuring.ⁱⁱ In the case of the 2011 LTS, its proposed measures were submitted to 126 national organisations. These included the National Labor market board, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education, trade unions, Regional County Administration Boards, the Swedish Association of local Authorities and Regions, as well as several universities and research institutions (Fi2011/631).

The empirical material examined in this article is the two latest main reports, LTS 2008 (SOU 2008a) and LTS 2011 (SOU 2011a). In addition to the main reports, three of the annexes that offer detailed perspectives on education are also investigated. The annexes that I have examined are the following:ⁱⁱⁱ

- Annex 8 to LTS 2008: *Choose freely and choose right. Incentives for rational educational choices* (SOU, 2008b) [Välja fritt och välja rätt. Drivkrafter för rationella utbildningsval]

Annex 8 to LU 2008 has the aim to highlight knowledge '... that reduces the incidence of incorrect education decisions, and how we can design incentives to create the "right" education of good quality' (SOU, 2008b, p. 10). In this policy text limits of rational choices are discussed particularly in terms of how lack of information of future earning limits the

productivity of choices. But it also stresses the importance of creating correct institutional circumstances that can profoundly contribute to a productive education in the future. This policy emphasis is further developed in the following 2011 annexes:

- Annex 2 to LTS 2011: *The secondary vocational education and market entry* (SOU, 2011b). [Den gymnasiala yrkesutbildningen och inträdet på arbetsmarknaden]
- Annex 3 to LTS 2011: *Factor affecting the late graduation of Swedish university students* (SOU, 2011c). [Vad förklarar svenska universitetsstudenters höga examensålder]

Annex 2 and 3 to the LTS from 2011 in many respects supplement the former 2008 LTS, with the objectives of transforming the education system so that throughput and matching, i.e. providing education pursued in the labor market are as efficient as possible (SOU, 2011b, pp. 107, 128-129; SOU, 2011c, pp. 173-174). However, the annexes and the main report differ in two important respects from the previous survey in regard to how conditions for educational choices can be enhanced. Firstly, LTS 2011 is based on investigations of a so-called outside perspective on the throughput of Swedish education where the purpose is to understand Sweden's preconditions in an OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) context of grant schemes, education fees and labor market conditions (SOU, 2011a, pp. 14, 17, 22-24; SOU, 2011c, pp. 174, 180). Secondly, it emphasizes more tangible needs of government for individual educational choices and decisions than in 2008, where for instance information about future returns in education (which is specifically underlined in the 2008 LTS) is seen as insufficient to counteract what is referred to as flawed educational decisions (SOU, 2011a, pp. 227-228; SOU, 2008a, p. 57). Information to individuals about future rewards in education according to the 2011 LTS needs to be accompanied by increased financial pressure on them to shape their education and future decisions in a direction favorable to Swedish society (SOU, 2011c, pp. 221-222). Analyzing this is mainly a task of investigating how LTS proposals for reforming education position actors in relation to structural conditions.

In practice my approach to this has been influenced by a semiotic form of content analysis in order to investigate conceptual meaning and correlation of the investigated policy texts (cf. Boréus, 1999, 2; Domas White, & Marsh, 2006, p. 27). A first step was to conduct a

comprehensive reading of the LTS and its annexes and discern the parts that concerned education issues. In this step of the analysis relatively broad categories of concepts were created. These concerned how education and choices in education in the LTS interrelated with issues of employment, entrance into the labor market, and cost-benefit analysis of public expenditures. This was not a clear matter of course, since there is no clear boundary between education, labor market, national or global economic conditions and overall development of the welfare state in the investigated texts.

Thus, in order to relate educational choices to an actor perspective and structural conditions theoretically driven questions were developed where I asked how structures – both implicitly and explicitly – can be understood in a regulative mode of individual choices. This was done by extracting conceptions of what constituted motives, opportunities and how these were interrelated to social and economic contexts (cf. Walton, 1992, p. 124). Basically, this has been a process of distinguishing what kind of agency that appears and how agents are linked to structures in the studied texts (cf. Majone, 1989, pp. 12-13). Methodologically speaking, it has resulted in an interaction between theory and empirical work that has resulted in the typological distinctions of how the material is presented and interpreted (cf. Ragin, 1992, p. 218).

Adaption towards productive knowledge in the LTS

A key concept for understanding the LTS' definitions of a 'well-designed education system' and adequate choices of education and career is the concept of opportunity cost (SOU, 2011a, pp. 221-222; SOU, 2011c, p. 205). Opportunity cost affects conditions for productive education from partly the time individuals spend in education, and partly how different education paths can be justified by future earnings. The cost in question is about lost revenue from income in employment, and the investment made in education that has to be weighted in relation to future lifetime incomes for individuals (SOU, 2008b, p. 78). The type of educational paths that are specifically considered to have the greatest scope for a more efficient balance between cost and performance is vocational secondary education and higher education. This brings the LTS to suggest several proposals for structural change: for vocational training it is suggested that a higher degree of interaction with employment services, job training, and qualification requirements are necessary (for instance by reducing the amount of compulsory subjects necessary for admission) in order to ease the transition to

vocational education and reduce delayed entry into the labor market (SOU, 2011a, pp. 224-225; SOU, 2011b, pp.144-149).

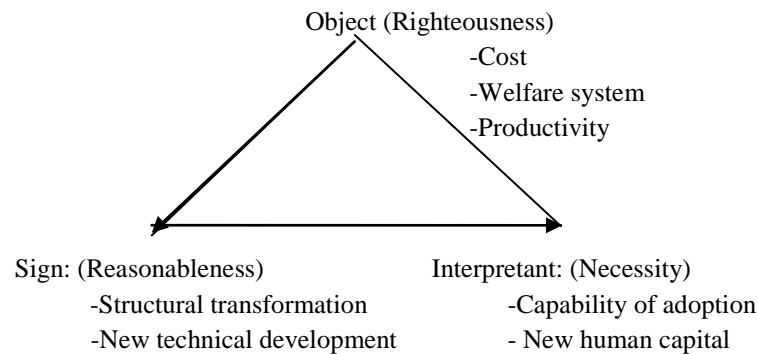
Suggested structural changes for higher education focus on how students should on the one hand be spurred to start higher education earlier in life and shorten the time needed for graduation (SOU, 2011a, p. 230). One possible way of rewarding the shorter time spent in education is according to the LTS to reward those graduating within a three year period with reduced costs for student loans (SOU, 2011a, pp. 231-232). In a complementary manner, accepting larger quotes of students applying with their secondary school grades, compared to those admitted through the Scholastic Aptitude Test is seen as efficient towards a more effective transition from secondary to higher education (SOU, 2011a, p. 231).^{iv} Also, the total period for having study-grants is suggested to be limited to a maximum four year period, with some exceptions for lengthy education tracks (SOU, 2011a, p. 234). The exempt amount, i.e. the income students can have in addition to grants, should be linked to academic performance, and reduced if students are unable to keep a full study pace (SOU 2011a, p. 220).

Another aspect of opportunity cost is related to policy imperatives of promoting democratic schooling, where the LTS suggests that efforts of reducing socially uneven recruitment should be carried out as early in the school as possible in order to best utilize public spending (SOU, 2008b, p 14). The LTS underlines that efforts to increase social mobility in relation to secondary or higher education is not economically beneficial since lifetime earnings will not compensate public investment cost (SOU, 2011a, p. 232; SOU, 2011c, pp. 205-206; SOU 2008b, p. 99). In order to achieve these objectives of slim-lining the time-cost axis, certain institutional changes are recognized as fundamental in order to develop a good adaptability.

The adoption of the individual to changing preconditions is basically about changing work-tasks or employers. If individuals have a good capacity of adaptability, they could easily find a new job. As showed in chapter 3, there are efficiency problems in Swedish education. This means a risk of inferior capacity of adaptability. Wider segments need to have better adaptability, since the technological development and internationalization leads new branches and occupations to become exposed to competition. This holds irrespectively if the transformation pace in the economy as a whole is increasing or not. That is why it is desirable to apply the work-strategy [arbetslinjen] [...]. From a socioeconomic point of view, it is not sustainable to let individuals' adaptability occur via long term absence from the labor market, with subsidies from public welfare insurance systems (SOU, 2008a, p. 128).

The possibility of *effective adaptation* is the key here, with the specific meaning that individuals can be quickly allocated to competitive branches of the economy without costly detours through publicly funded welfare institutions. The relationship that emerges can from a semiotic interpretation be outlined as follows in relation to *reasonableness*, *necessity* and *righteousness*.

Figure 2. Productive aims of knowledge



The direction of the arrows above indicates the relationship of how the LTS emphasizes desirable adaptability based on how the burden of expenses on the welfare sector and productivity is related to changing conditions in production, and therefore new requirements of human capital. The relation between knowledge and education is not clearly specified, but the *righteousness* of cost reduction guides how individuals should adapt to current as well as future economic conditions through education. This is about making the aims to cut down welfare cost into an objective and increasing individuals' motives for employment through educational choices, with subsequently increased productivity. What is also apparent is a chain of reasoning that constitutes a *necessity* in relation to how interpretants should adjust to these stipulated objective conditions. These are mediated through the plausibility of agents' flexibility towards changing production conditions, edified as signs of *reasonableness* in order to stimulate comparative advantages. This is about the conceptual policy aims of institutional arrangements that will stimulate knowledge intensive production through education and the labor market policies: aims that are basically vindicated by how Sweden can assert itself in an international economy (SOU, 2008a, pp. 26-27; SOU, 2011a, pp. 43-45). What becomes reasonable in this context is expressed in terms of increased individual responsibility of not being absent from the labor market and the promotion of institutional arrangements that reduce people's dependencies on public welfare.

But the LTS finds difficulties in achieving an adequate balance in relation to opportunity cost if the institutional imperatives described above are not followed by supportive incentives of how to encourage people's choices and decisions in education. This matching of quality between structure and actor is what the LTS describes as most problematic (SOU, 2011a, pp. 228-229).

Matching knowledge to productivity

Matching quality in this context means that public investment in education and the allocation of costs between the individual and public spending need to be streamlined in relation to young people's choices and decisions (SOU, 2011a, p. 42; SOU, 2008b, p. 21). There are two main aspects. Firstly, specific forms of institutional and economic government for creating a productive balance between which education paths people choose and secondly the educations that are required in the labor market (SOU, 2011a, pp. 220-222). This is basically underlined as a comprehensive structural regulation of entrance qualifications and grants to promote educations desirable by the labor market together with a complementary form of government concerns for the implementation of sufficient incentives that would affect people's motives for making the *right* educational choices (SOU, 2011c, p. 222; SOU, 2008a, p. 77; SOU, 2008b, p. 18).

One question that arises is thus how it is possible to understand the so called socially optimal choices as rational adaptations of knowledge that contribute to a matching between labor market demands and educational provision (SOU, 2011a, pp. 42-43, 225-226; SOU, 2011c, p. 208): that is, how knowledge becomes indicative for a productive exchange between employment and education. The figure below illustrates the correlation.

choices people make but also what educations that are offered. This leads the LTS to recognize a challenge in how to persuade people to make the ‘right’ choices:

An individual’s educational choices would be socially optimal if (i) the individuals making school choices acted rationally and made schooling choices based on expected (monetary) returns, if (ii) the individuals paid all the costs and received all benefits from investments in education, and if (iii) the individuals could freely borrow the funds needed for investments without credit or other constraints. In this case, there would be no need for the government to intervene with individual decision making. Socially optimal decisions would also not only imply that the choices of the educational level would be optimal, but also that the choices of when to invest would be socially optimal. Therefore, the government would have no reason to try to affect the timing of education either. However, conditions (i), (ii) and (iii) are unlikely to hold in reality and this motivates public interventions in private decisions regarding education (SOU, 2011c, p. 206).

The above quote suggests how an individual’s lack of strict rational preferences (in terms of monetary returns) complicates a sufficiently good match and ‘socially optimal’ choices. The object of knowledge is thus becoming a question of alternation, to weigh the costs against future profits, but also a matter of performativity in relation to rational preferences. That is, how to persuade individuals towards rational choices denoted as socially optimal. Noteworthy is the relationship that appears between institutional government, such as forming the organization of the educational system and the forming of rational skills amongst agents to perform utility maximizing educational choices.

What can be argued from a theoretical point of view is the importance to address how the policy signification of rational choices in this perspective conceptualizes rational actors. In an epistemological sense this bears resemblance to the analytic distinctions made of an *economic man* – an actor with limited and well defined motives for macroeconomic analysis (cf. Archer, 2000; Bowles & Gintis, 1993; Persky, 1995; Sen, 1977). In turn, these are policy analyses that are vital to address in terms of how motives, utilities and responsibilities through educational choices becomes reconciled.

Implementations of cognitive necessities

In terms of challenges for implementing responsibility by choices, the LTS recognizes that so called ‘externalities’ such as the choice of educational pathway or timing can distort young people’s educational choices in terms of innovation and adaptability. Accordingly what is

considered as a well-designed education should take into account aspects relating to demand, supply and matching (SOU, 2011a, p. 221). This provides a model based on both individual responsibilities of applicable educational choices as well as structural ascendancy.

For the labor market to function properly, both information and incentives are required for creating an effective government of choices in different educational paths. An efficient structural change also requires an ability of [people's] adaption to relevant incentives, and the ability to retain and develop its human capital, so that they maintain their employability (SOU, 2011a, p 45).

On the whole a generic form of knowledge emerges where learning or knowledge should not be limited to a system or individual processes. What people ought to know - the *reasonableness* of knowledge or learning - is instead an adaptable approach to structural change nationally as well as globally. This resembles Liedman's (2008) and Sjöberg's (2009) contextualization of similar policy processes in the cross-section between knowledge, productivity and internationalization in Sweden, and the international trends described by for instance Brine (2006) and Jessop (2004).

However, this makes the LTS emphasis on the specific forms of the 'work-strategy' adaption as part of a welfare regime hard to separate from global neoliberal policies on how to divide the responsibilities between the state and its citizens.^v Arguably, knowledge of making the right choices is in this respect imposed as a process where agents have to learn to identify themselves, at least to some extent, as economic subjects that are able to cope with economic transformation and adjust to the *necessity* of knowledge adoption (cf. Beach & Dovemark, 2009, p. 694).

Reconciliation of knowledge and productivity through people's choices

The relationship between productivity and new forms of knowledge as emphasized in the Swedish LTS, are seemingly in line with global policy formations emphasizing the 'knowledge based economy' (cf. OECD, 1996, 2000).^{vi} This is a specific categorization of global and national conditions in production that lead the LTS to conclusions and proposals similar to developments in the EU and OECD countries to reduce public expenditure through new forms of matching between education and employability (SOU 2008a, p. 202; SOU 2011a, pp. 91-94). Brown and Lauder (2006, p. 28), Jacobsson (2004, p. 55) and Warren and Webb (2007) have made a comparison of other similar international educational policies.

They show how a generic reformation of human capital is created that rests on the critical premise that the distribution and use of knowledge as an economic source of prosperity and growth is profoundly important for structural changes in production. In essence these are changes which emphasise that the forms of ‘knowledge’ are partly an object to compete about and partly possible to reform into adaptable commodities in contemporary economies. National and global educational policies thus tend to unite in the ‘notions of deviance’ created by how policy creates objective categories and how these become submitted for reform and revision (Lindblad, 2005, pp. 42, 77).

The LTS policy advocacy thus resembles the ongoing trend of global ‘inter-borrowing’ of policies, which tends to originate in either the OECD or the World Bank, and which then circulates through different national contexts (Ball 1999, pp. 199-200; cf. Jacobsson, 1999, pp. 6-8). As Garsten and Jacobsson (2004, p. 11) point out new rights and responsibilities arise in how to create economically productive citizens in the intersection between national and transnational policy contexts. These are conversely rights and responsibilities that tend to be centered around key concepts of a rather intangible cognitive nature by the emphasis on notably ‘employability’, ‘entrepreneurship’, ‘adaptability’ and ‘flexibility’ (Jacobsson, 2004, p. 43). The underlying idea is seemingly one about ways of directing cognitive abilities toward changes in the welfare system and technical and organizational change in production simultaneously, which thus also implies that knowledge should be made into a more flexible and adaptable commodity for production in present economies.

More particularly in the case of LTS, the presumption of knowledge as a possible commodity can be put forward as constitutive for a distinction of *necessity* since knowledge and learning should be provided, assimilated and transformed in a context where constant innovation and adaptability are the new targets (SOU, 2008a, pp. 102-103, 2011a, p. 45). This is in line with Gee, Hull and Lankshear’s (1996, pp. 56, 152) account of the rise of ‘new capitalism’, where the focus on ‘flexibility, speed and innovation’ influences civic adoption of educational goals related to increasing productivity despite a multiplicity of challenges that are associated with these goals in practice. What can basically be said to constitute these challenges is how to redirect policy concerns to people’s perceptions and decision-making.

Apparently, this indicates a considerable function of legitimizing individual responsibilities in relation to the State (Jessop, 2008, pp. 18-19). It resembles global contracts of citizenship

from Torres (2002, p. 369), where national governments in a global economy strive to avoid 'economic sclerosis' by forms of self-reduction that are driven by perceptions of global requirement. It is basically hard to avoid not taking into account how transnational powers conflate with local contexts or for that matter that this is a form of policy implication that is hard to oppose (Gadiotti, 1996, p. 5). However, local actors and contexts may also modify or transform global economic and political processes on a national and local level (Arnove, 2003, p. 3; cf. Lindblad et al., 2002, p. 285). Put simply, there are always national variations within the focal similarities of rationalities and responsibilities in the ongoing global policy trends in education.

Common in the current policy aims are thus forms of commitment that indicate a desirable individual adaptability, where the individual is responsible for investing in his/her own success (cf. Brown & Hesketh, 2004, pp. 88-89; Garsten & Jacobsson, 2004, pp. 10-11). One consequence is accordingly that individuals' motives and expectations are allocated within a relation between people and the State that rest on certain mediating premises. These premises resemble Lundvall's (1996, p. 16) framing of 'communicative rationality' in terms of '...a shared and genuine interest in understanding new phenomena'. But as noted by Flyvbjerg (1998), this is as a use of 'rationality' for the sake of 'public interests' that is evidently difficult to separate from the exercise of power and control over knowledge:

Power determines what counts as knowledge, what kind of interpretation attains authority as the dominant interpretation. Power procures the knowledge which supports its purposes, while it ignores or suppresses that knowledge which does not serve it. Moreover, the *relations* between knowledge and power are decisive if one seeks to understand the kinds of processes affecting the dynamics of politics, administration, and planning. (Flyvbjerg, 1998, p. 226).

From an educational policy perspective the mediation of a communicative rationality bears resemblance to a relation that in its ideal form appears as an exchange between individuals and the State similar to 'consumers and producers' in a relationship that gives satisfaction to the former and profits for the latter (Ball, 2006, p. 82). However, these unstable and irresolute preconditions of knowledge as an exchange value provide (even if inconsistently) the analysis with essential elements in the definition of knowledge utilization that is desired among individuals' educational choices in the investigated policy texts (cf. Fairclough et al., 2004; Jessop, 2008). Even if these are blurred forms of knowledge designation primarily consist of

guidelines underlining adaption to potential productivity, they still provide some key elements in understanding a policy based on government through rationalities of knowledge utilization.

From a semiotic aspect, the relationship between knowledge as an object or as desired subjective entities on a policy level is basically maintained by signs of exchange that linguistically subsume certain *notions of economy* as the *real economy* (Jessop, 2004, pp. 162, 168). In particular, this is by Jessop (2008, p. 15) put as a delineation of political context in terms of a ‘cultural political economy’, which illustrates how both semiotic and material conditions can be dialectically integrated in social transformations in contemporary capitalism if nourished on a political level. From one perspective it is a policy setting that provides a selective and reductive perspective for the complexity that characterizes educational choices in this case. What thus are provided are interpretations of knowledge and adaptability which stipulate desirable relationship between agents and social structures. It is these stipulations (even if they only offer vague explanations and distinctions between what constitute productivity and knowledge) that arguably constitute the fundamentals for a system of meaning in the LTS.

Discussion

The LTS policy proposals evidence a generic relation of economic exchange based on specific rational mediation between the State and its citizens through a semiotics that conceptualizes institutional and organizational resources with individual dispositions and accordingly people’s educational wants (Daoud & Puaca, 2011; Warren & Webb, 2007). Consequently, the educational choices and processes - that are actually profoundly social, cultural and cognitive deliberations - become subjected to economic interpretations that are slanted towards effectiveness (cf. Ball, Davies, David, and Reay, 2002, pp. 55-56). This indicates a semiotic subjectification as a dialogue of mutual exchange, but as indicated by Gadiotti (1996, pp. 4-5) dialogues of educational aims and purposes can ‘hide elements such as complacency and complicity’ or be used in a dominated way as a ‘dialogue without opposition’.

The policy objectives in the LTS discern this semiotic subjectification as a challenge concerning how to make political and economic regulation through individual learning processes and self-regulation based on information about future incomes and opportunities in employment. A selection of structural conditions becomes semantically signified as bounding

this process, and it is here argued as a manifested categorization of reality that becomes constitutive for this system of meaning. Basically, this is through a two-level structure and categorization of society's preconditions and individual motives (cf. Elder-Vass, 2009, pp. 10-12), where the consistent factors that hold the levels together are economic exchange and utility maximization respectively.

Table 1. Two leveled structure of agents' motive and societal preconditions

	Motive	Preconditions	Reform proposals
Individual	Income level Unemployment risks Capacity of adaption	Utility maximizing agents (Labor)market adaption	Employability imperatives Objective information (e.g. lifetime earnings, unemployment risks) Leveled educational programs
Society	Transformation capacity Productive/flexible human capital	Global conditions (comparative advantages) Knowledge economy	New model of welfare ('work strategy' policy) New allocation of resources to educational sites (stimulate productive education)

A semiotic sign of reason is apparent in how knowledge both interrelates to an object (market conditions) and subjects (rational actors) in the way that they stipulate how a specific codified economic value is causal in relation to both structure and agency. What this in turn illustrates is evidently a form of pre-eminence over choices that become apparent in (i) provision of information on education paths with maximum yield, (ii) limiting the choice of less productive pathways, and (iii) in the event that these previous points don't work out, making use of economic instruments (e.g. through a targeted student aid system) that would lead to educational choices being made in a desirable socio-economic direction.

These three points make up on the one hand the objects of a desired alignment of choices to be made by agents and the fundamentals for how rationalities and subjectivities are to be constructed in relation to educational choices in LTS. Somewhat paradoxically the limits of rationality in terms of people's deliberations are also addressed in the LTS. It is underlined that people obviously do not always make choices in education based on negotiations of

economic returns (SOU, 2011c, p. 206). But these problems tend to be subordinated to the advantages that it means to assume a person with limited and well defined motives. What appears is an *economic man* that strives for utility maximization, which is as such useful as an abstraction in the analysis of the LTS (cf. Ball, 2007, pp. 157-158). The attraction towards this form of rational abstraction is fairly understandable: rational actors are transparent from an analytical point of view since they provide subjects that strive to codify knowledge in relation to utility maximization. This is a person driven by demarked motives based on a mode of rationality that emanates of utilizing advantages in regard to others. But the economic man is reasonably not more than a hypothetical person (cf. Persky, 1995, Sen, 1977).

By utilizing arguments provided by Archer (2000, pp. 45-53) the LTS perspective of rationality, and rational actors in particular, is thus seen to offer an awkward causality: a *Homo economicus* that is based on an ontology that reduces the importance of multiple selves - rational, normative, and emotional. In a CR understanding, it is fundamental to complete this picture with a *Homo sociologicus*, i.e. a social person that shapes and is shaped by a multitude of structures. But that in itself is not enough. To understand motivation behind choices of agents, as a holistic entity, it is also important to ensure agents with a dimension of *Homo Sentiens* - the human who perceives. This is an agent that makes moral commitments, and has a reason to be moral by virtue of their participation in society (see also Sayer, 2000, pp. 82-83, 95).

Conclusion

I want to draw two conclusions here. Firstly, even if not utterly developed in this text, I would argue that the semiotic mediation that emerges in the LTS (see Figure 2 and Figure 3) is essentially important to understand in relation to ideological markers of how rational subjects could preferably be designed. If viewed from this perspective, the policy ambitions of forming rational choices and stable preferences amongst agents is an example of a form of government utilizing rationality as signs of *reasonableness* and *righteousness*. The consequence from a CR position is thus a semiotic selective process that reduces agents' cognitive capacity in relation to educational and professional decisions and produces narrow aims of symmetrical formation of knowledge in regard of creating employable agents. Secondly, also evident is an

epistemological and ontological reduction in the guise of how we can understand people in a social context (Bhaskar, 1998a, pp. 73-74; Fairclough et al. 2004).

In Jessop's (2004, pp. 160-162) terms, what is taking place can be seen as a massive reduction in complexity at the policy level in the LTS, which is manipulatively designated on the basis of how economic exchange can be premeditated in an attempt to control meaning and motivation with an emergent effect on both agents (for instance our motives for educational choices) and structural conditions (organizational preconditions for choices in education). I would suggest that in order to understand an educational policy with ambitions of creating somewhat rational choices amongst agents, the role of semiotics in ideological contexts is crucial for further investigation.

As a summary, what is offered in LTS from 2008 and 2011 is an apparition of society's conditions, leading to government proposals about agents' choices and actions in relation to what is *right* for the individual and society. Thus, this form of government suggests an imposed economic rationality. More uncertain is whether these presented forms of rationality really prepare either society or its citizens for a changing world. Arguably, they underestimate essential holistic dimensions on educational choices and decisions from a CR perspective, and in the prolongation may reduce the democratic and civic virtues that are officially still an educational policy goal inside Sweden's attempts to embrace the 'knowledge society' (cf. Prop., 2009, p. 15).

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ⁱ Education is arranged within these policies in line with imperatives of reformulating the Swedish welfare model of 'work strategy' (arbetslinjen), by streamlining public spending and motivating citizens towards employment by reducing subsidies in e.g. unemployment compensation, or sickness benefits (SOU 2008a, 2011a). In terms of education, the aim is basically to streamline both time and outcomes in relation to macroeconomic gains, which is not new in relation to educational policies of how to best make investment in human capital (cf. Bowles & Gintis, 1993, p. 85; Erikson & Jonsson, 1993, ch.2).

ⁱⁱ The first survey was published 1948 (then called the 'Long-term program'), and was carried out by commission of the *Organisation for European Economic Co-operation*, the precursor of the OECD. Since 1965 the LTS is conducted by the Swedish Ministry of Finance, and is generally published in three year terms.

ⁱⁱⁱ The titles of the annexes 8 and 2 are translated from Swedish by the author. The publication of annex 3 was provided with an English title. Links to online versions of the investigated policy texts are provided in the reference list.

^{iv} The Scholastic Aptitude Test is mainly recognized as a tool for older students and students with grades not sufficiently competitive to enter higher education.

^v By the different historic fluctuations between inclusion and responsibilities that can be attributed to the 'work-strategy' model in Sweden since the 1930s, this can accordingly be seen as a pendulum towards 'control and discipline' (cf. Björnberg, 2012, p. 84; Grape, 1998, p. 112; Junestav, 2004, pp. 21-26, 241-242).

^{vi} A key document in this policy context is the OECD report 'The Knowledge-Based Economy' (1996), which emphasizes that new global opportunities for trade and production, and an advanced development in information technology, have to be matched by comprehensive reforms of human capital.