

SOLON Members' Research Interests and Current Projects

Dr Roddy Nilsson¹

'Gendered Violence in Nineteenth Century Sweden'

On going research project

Together with a colleague, Marie Eriksson Ph.D., I am currently working with a three-year project (2013–2015) dealing with female violence in the nineteenth century. Below follows a presentation of the aim of the project.

The central aim of the project is to produce a more comprehensive analysis of women as perpetrators of violence and violent crime in nineteenth and twentieth century Sweden. The project has two interrelated parts, one focusing on women as perpetrators of deadly violence and one focusing on women as perpetrators of assault, minor violence and disorderly conduct. The project will be carried out in close contact with international research that has shown that there are several reasons to question many representations of female violence in the past.

With the exception of infanticide violent crime conducted by women has to a large extent been neglected by former research. Women's crimes have been seen as quantitatively insignificant and subordinate male crimes. We still know relatively little about female perpetrators. This is most evident when it comes to violent crime. Perhaps surprisingly, the lack of knowledge in the case of Sweden is most striking regarding the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

Central questions asked in the project deal with how and why women used violence as well as in what social and cultural contexts these acts took place. In the end we are interested in the broader problem of the links between female violence, gender and culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Thus, the project aims at developing our understanding of crime in the modern era in general as well expand our grasp of the more specific problem of gender and crime from a historical perspective.

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The 100 years from the middle of nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth century was a period of immense change for women regarding citizenship, working conditions, motherhood, family relations etc. Hence it is relevant to include a long-time perspective in our analysis. This approach also has the advantage of highlighting continuity and change in different areas, as well as providing historical knowledge that can contribute to critical perspectives on contemporary social concerns.

There is a need for deeper investigations of the prevalence of female violence. Parallel to our interest in the changes in frequency and character regarding women's violent practices in the past we contend that it is more relevant, and urgent, to get a deeper understanding of *how* female violence actually came to happen. In order to deepen our understanding of female violence we find it necessary to widen our definitions of concepts like 'agency', 'gender' and 'violence'. This demands a strategy that approaches the sources with a new 'gaze', placing women as actors at the centre of the analysis, and decentres the male subject as the norm for theories on violence.

Crime and norm-breaking acts generate meanings that reveal central elements in the social and cultural structure of every society. Consequently a study of female violence is central to attain a deeper understanding of women and women's roles in society, but also of society, culture and gender in a broader sense. Finally, a historical analysis of violent women could contribute to explanations on why violence, for such a long time, has been seen as almost exclusively a male domain and why society provides such a narrow discourse for situating violent women.

Publications

My Ph.D. thesis (in Swedish) *A Well-built Machine, a Nightmare for the Soul: The Swedish Prison System during the 19th century* was published in 1999. Since then I have undertaken further research on the subject of prison studies resulting in other articles 'A Well-Built Machine, a Nightmare for the soul: The Swedish Prison System in Historical Perspective, *Journal of the Institute of Justice and International Studies*, 1, (2002); 'The Swedish Prison System in Historical Perspective: a Story of a Successful Failure?' *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, 1, (2003); and 'Creating the Swedish Juvenile Delinquent: Criminal Policy, Science and Institutionalization, c. 1930–1970 *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 4, 2009. Other publications are a textbook (in Swedish), *Control, Power, and Care: Social Problems and Social Policy in Sweden, 1780–1940* (Lund: Studentlitteratur 2003), (in Swedish) *Foucault. En introduktion* (Malmö: Egalité 2008) and (in Swedish,

together with Robert Andersson), *Svensk kriminalpolitik* (Malmö: Liber 2009) as well as several articles (in Swedish) dealing with crime in a historical perspective.

Most recent publications are 'The most progressive, effective correctional system in the world? The Swedish prison system in 1960s and 1970s', in Thomas Ugelvik and Jane Dullum, *The Nordic model – exception or not? Exploring institutions of confinement in the Nordic context(s)* (Cullompton: Palgrave 2011); 'From Learning to Labour to Learning to Self-Control: The Paradigmatic Change in Swedish Prison Policy' *Journal of Scandinavian Studies in Criminology and Crime Prevention*, supplement 1 (2013); 'Images of the criminal: Swedish prison chaplains and pastoral power in the 19th century' *Crime, History & Society* 2013, 17(1) (2013) and a major study of prisons and penal policy in Sweden from the 1930s to the 1980s (in Swedish), *Från cellfängelse till beteendeterapi. Fängelse, kriminalpolitik och vetande 1930–1980* (Malmö: Egalité 2013). The book deals with the legal and administrative measure and rationalities that have dominated the Swedish National Prison system as well as penal policy in general during the latter half of the twentieth century especially problematizing its taken-for-granted reform character.