

Andreas Öjehag-Pettersson,
Department of Political,
Historical, Religious and
Cultural Studies, Faculty of
Arts and Social Sciences,
Karlstad University,
andreas.ojehag@kau.se

Mikael Granberg,
Department of Political,
Historical, Religious and
Cultural Studies, Faculty of
Arts and Social Sciences,
Karlstad University,
mikael.granberg@kau.se

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Abstract

Swedish local government plays a central role in welfare production, providing some of the most crucial services to citizens. However, over the last decades there have been significant changes in how local governments are governed and how services are implemented. In many cases, these changes entail the promotion of rationalities and technologies associated with market-oriented principles and values as the primary means to providing welfare services. A central feature in this is *public procurement*. This phenomenon has been surprisingly absent from scholarly work that focuses on marketisation and the politics of public sector reform in Sweden. In this article, we present a case study based on interviews with actors involved in public procurement in Swedish local government. We provide insights into how public procurement sustains and expands the rationalities of marketisation. We conclude that the importance of public procurement has expanded, producing organisational changes and, perhaps most importantly, we are witnessing changes in the role of civil servants in Swedish public administration.

Introduction

In recent decades Sweden has witnessed an intensification in the use of procurement as an important tool for public sector actors in the production of welfare (Upphandlingsmyndigheten/Swedish National Agency for Public Procurement and Konkurrensverket/Swedish Competition Authority, 2018). This practice can, by and large, be said to be a fundamental part of ongoing processes of New Public Management (NPM) in general and marketisation of the public sector in particular (Pierre & Peters, 2018; Politt & Bouckaert, 2017).

In Sweden, local self-government is a pivotal principle, making local government a central actor in the wider system of national welfare governance (Montin & Granberg 2013). This also entails a central role in the expansion of marketisation and makes local government an important arena for the implementation and development of public procurement as an instrument of governing (Hall, Löfgren & Peters, 2016). Indeed, while differences exist in terms of the general development among countries in Europe (and beyond) with respect to the transformation of the public sector (Politt & Bouckaert, 2017), the common NPM-inspired theme still reverberates throughout Swedish local government today. Thus, even though new initiatives beyond NPM may be on the ascendancy (Sundström, 2016), it is safe to say that Swedish local government operates under a system of governance that is permeated by markets and market logics (e.g. Montin, 2016). Throughout this article, we use the term marketisation in an inclusive way in relation to this development. Marketisation consequently refers to both specific processes and practices within the public

***Andreas Öjehag-Pettersson** is senior lecturer in political science at Karlstad university, Sweden. His research is currently focused on marketization, local government and public procurement. In addition to this he maintains an interest for the politics of space with a specific focus on regional development as well as critical policy studies more generally.

Mikael Granberg is professor of political science and the director of the Centre for Climate and Safety at Karlstad University. He is also a research fellow of the Centre for Natural Hazards and Disaster Science at Uppsala University. His main focus is political processes and organizing. A special interest is if, and how, institutionalized political practices and norms facilitates or hinders collective action especially with regard to sustainable development and action on climate change.

administration that are part of the creation and installation of markets as systems of resource allocation, as well as more general tendencies in society where market rationality is expanding into more or less all areas of human activity.

While the processes of economisation and marketisation are well researched, both in the international literature (e.g. Ahrne, Aspers & Brunsson, 2015; Çalışkan & Callon, 2009; 2010; Fligstein, 1996) and in studies focusing on the Swedish context (Andersson, Erlandsson & Sundström, 2017; Björkman, Fjæstad & Alexius, 2014), we argue that given its central role in the concrete practice of making and fostering markets, it is important to pay explicit attention to how public procurement is organised and implemented within contemporary public organisations. Not only is this of great theoretical importance for scholars interested in public administration and processes of marketisation, but it is also a rapidly expanding process with a considerable impact on the organisation of public services.

Recent estimates show that public procurement accounts for roughly 17 percent of Swedish GDP, and of the 18,525 procurement processes initiated during 2017, some 69 percent were advertised by local governments (Upphandlingsmyndigheten and Konkurrensverket, 2018). Furthermore, these circumstances are also intertwined with the deployment of what we might call a new agenda for public procurement in Sweden, which aligns with the policy ambitions of the European Commission (EC), as the Swedish government has issued a new law, instated a new national agency for public procurement and formulated a national public procurement strategy. Thus, for a number of reasons, not least financial and economic but also political, the regulation of public procurement has developed into a significant factor in understanding local government policy and its implementation in Sweden (Montin & Granberg 2013: 18; EU 2004; EU, 2013; SFS 2007:1091; SFS 2007:1092).

However, academic interest in public procurement has mainly been, and continues to be, dominated by research questions concerning judicial interpretations, economic efficiency and specialised issues pertaining to public procurement of various goods or practices such as construction, IT services or management (Furusten, 2014; 2015). In this sense, aspects of public procurement are well researched. However, there are a number of important questions that are seldom explored (Charron et al. 2017: 90). In particular, this concerns what we might label *the politics of public procurement*, or in other words, issues of how practices of making markets, tendering and contracting out affect governing, control and the bureaucratic organisation.

In the case of Sweden, research on the role and function of public procurement in the public administration is more or less non-existent (although there are some notable exceptions, e.g. Furusten, 2015; Sporrang, 2014; Hall, Löfgren & Peters, 2016). Thus, while scholars are conducting important and influential work on the regimes of governance that might come after NPM (e.g. Sundström, 2016), on the organisation of markets (e.g. Ahrne, Aspers & Brunsson, 2015), on the influence of auditing and control (e.g. Johansson & Montin, 2014; Johansson, 2015) on the legal issues related to contracting out (Pierre & Painter, 2010) and on the stealth-like appropriation of economic theory in public administration (Pierre, 2011), an explicit focus on public procurement seems to be missing from the literature.

In this study, we therefore present an analysis in which public procurement is understood as an instrument of governing associated with the rationalities of

marketisation and competition. We assume that such an instrument is not neutral or accidental, but rather designed to realise particular understandings of how to govern through the market. More precisely, we argue that studying how such an important governmental technology is perceived and understood by those active in current public organisations enables us to gain insights into important aspects concerning how the making of markets for the public generates organisational and governmental effects. In this regard, Swedish local government bureaucracy constitutes a paradigmatic example where NPM practices and market-inspired reforms have been thoroughly rolled out in recent decades, creating a stark contrast to more classical assumptions of bureaucracies (Charron et al. 2017).

In sum, then, we argue that actors engaged with public procurement practices in Swedish local government would be able to reflect upon, interpret and describe how they experience the development of public procurement in their everyday work and how it has changed in relation to the organisation of which they are a part. Accordingly, this article is based on interviews with people working directly with public procurement in Swedish local government. Based on the interviews, we first reconstruct a context narrative that our interviewees repeatedly return to, namely *the expansion of public procurement*. While this may be quite self-evident, it seems to be important for people involved to reflect upon how the activity of which they are a part has expanded and how they feel as if they are just witnessing the beginning of change. Second, we reconstruct three salient themes based on our interviewees' interpretations of public procurement as part of contemporary local government: 1) *organisational set-up and increased political ambitions* perceived to be important to consider when describing the practice of public procurement today; 2) *market language and thinking*, emerging among civil servants as they focus on being attractive to the entrepreneurs whose services or products are being procured; 3) *consultancy and shifting roles for civil servants* in the public administration following on an expanding public procurement.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to investigate how public procurement, as a central and understudied part of ongoing marketisation processes in the public sector, is perceived and practiced by actors in Swedish local government directly involved with it. We argue that our study constitutes a paradigmatic case as we extract a prototype from the empirical material that can be utilised to illustrate ongoing processes of marketisation through the means of public procurement in Sweden and beyond (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Pavlich, 2010). Thus, while our data set does not allow for empirical generalisation, we argue that as a paradigmatic case it illustrates broader tendencies, principles, logics and themes in the contemporary paradigm of marketisation impacting public administration. In this respect Swedish public administration is a suitable starting point since, contrary to its still quite common classification as part and parcel of a social democratic welfare state, Sweden is one of the most comprehensively marketised nations in the world today (Ahlbeck Öberg & Widmalm 2016).

Following this introduction, the article is structured in four main sections. First, we present the case context as we describe Swedish local government and its development over the last decades with respect to processes of marketisation and its expression in new forms of governance. Second, we turn to a description of the case studied and also how the empirical data were generated. Third, in the main section of the article, we present the empirical analysis which is then used

as a point of departure for a short concluding discussion in the fourth and final section.

Case Context: Swedish Local Government, Governance and Public Procurement

Briefly put, Sweden is an integrative central-local government system (Montin & Granberg 2013; Montin 2016; Granberg 2018). Given its tradition of strong local government with high national welfare ambitions the country therefore provides an interesting context for studies of local government action mediated through market mechanisms (Granberg 2018). Local government resources, functions and responsibilities have expanded over time as new functions have been allocated to local governments, and, accordingly, they are responsible for a broad range of tasks, from childcare to economic development. The concept of strong local government ensuring efficient welfare production has, however, been challenged over the last decades by reforms grounded in neo-liberal market perspectives (Montin 2016; Granberg 2018; Johansson, Lindgren & Montin 2018).

During the early years of the 21st century this development has been accentuated through freedom of choice reforms and policies focusing on competition, opening up local government services to private businesses as external service providers whilst also subjecting internal service provision to both internal and external competition (Montin 2016). Accordingly, Swedish local governments act in a context characterised by high demands for economically efficient welfare production with market rationalities and competition as fundamental features of governing (Montin & Granberg 2013; Montin 2016). Thus, the Swedish local government system has made considerable moves towards the market as competition between market actors have become an integral part of public sector activities (Granberg 2018).

In the Swedish context, civil servants have traditionally been perceived as the “guardians” of democracy both in practice and by scholars (Lundquist 1998; Svensson 2013; Johansson, Lindgren & Montin 2018). However, the impact of the market reforms on the role of civil servants has been considerable. As a basic illustration, consider how in 1980 all functions and services of Swedish local government were directed, controlled and produced within the local government organisation by its own staff (Johansson, Lindgren & Montin 2018). Today, we can paint a very different picture. Thus, in the wake of market reforms that have entailed transferring public functions to private actors, creating and enhancing competition, and a stronger focus on narrow economic efficiency, there is an ongoing re-conceptualisation of the role for public administration and civil servants (Hysing & Olsson 2012; Sundström 2018; Johansson, Lindgren & Montin 2018).

The intensified use and significance of public procurement as part of the broad developments described above has amplified the importance of contracts and negotiations that in turn, has influenced the preconditions for political steering and control (Hall, Löfgren & Peters 2016; Montin 2016; Charron et al. 2017; Hodgson et al. 2019). External entrepreneurs increasingly handle the actual provision of public sector functions and services, funded by tax revenue and with local government taking the overarching political and democratic responsibility (at least formally).

As for the political dimension of public procurement, it remains surprisingly understudied, not only in a Swedish context, but also internationally. That being said, some scattered publications on public procurement and local government addressing dimensions of “politics” do exist. In the Swedish context Hall, Löfgren and Peters (2016) have studied green public procurement and street-level bureaucrats in the decentralised Swedish government system. In addition to the topic of sustainable development, there are studies focusing on corruption in local government that includes public procurement processes (Bergh et al. 2016). Broms, Dahlström and Fazekas (2017) focus on the relationship of political competition and risk of manipulation of public procurement processes in Swedish local government. Charron et al. (2017) address the relationship between the assignment of public contracts, the interplay between politics and bureaucracy and risks of corruption. They work with a large data set based on surveys to public administrators in European regions and conclude that corruption is low when bureaucrats are recruited and follow careers based on professional criteria (as in bureaucracies, see Peters & Pierre 2018). Coviello and Gagliarducci (2017) have studied Italian local government with a focus on mayor’s tenure and the quality of public procurement and risks for corruption. Sporrang (2014) represents another public procurement theme in the literature that is more linked to the built environment and processes of local governance in that sector. There are also studies that focus on the politics of public procurement, at least to some extent, in Swedish national agencies (e.g. Furusten 2015; Jacobsson & Sundström 2018). However, all in all, the conclusion after this review of existing literature that focuses on public procurement is that there is a surprising dearth in research concerning its political effects and its central position in the ongoing processes of marketisation. In this sense, this study expands present research and aims to explore new avenues concerning the politics of public procurement.

Methodology and Data Generation

The analysis draws on 14 interviews conducted between spring 2015 and early 2017. The interviewees held different positions within local government as we interviewed procurers, consultants and politicians with different experiences of public procurement. They worked in four Swedish local governments ranging from large to very large using a Swedish frame of reference. In terms of inhabitants, this means that they spanned roughly 100 000 to 1 million inhabitants. We are aware that this gives a bias in our material as it is constituted by larger local governments with a different pool of resources than most of their smaller peers. However, our goal when working with the material was neither to provide empirical generalisation based on the selected cases, nor to compare and classify different types of local governments. Rather, as mentioned, we treated them together as a paradigmatic case, or in other words as a case that ‘highlights more general characteristics’ of the phenomena in question (Flyvbjerg 2006: 232), these phenomena being the utilization of procurement as part of a wider marketisation of the public sector. We argue that the Swedish public sector, contrary to a lingering image of a social democratic welfare system, in its contemporary expression is well suited to serve as a starting point for theoretical discussions in this regard. Indeed, recent studies point to the Swedish system as exceptional, not because it is shielded from market reforms, NPM or neoliberal transformation, but precisely because it is now one of the most comprehensively

marketised public sector systems in the world (Ahlbeck Öberg & Widmalm 2016). Thus, we argue that while empirical generalisation based on our data is not possible, theoretical generalisations are. We mean this in the sense that the results presented here can serve as a prototype that can be used to illuminate ongoing processes of marketisation, and specifically public procurement, in empirical contexts beyond the local examples we draw on here (Pavlich, 2010).

The sample of interviewees is diverse in terms of position, hierarchy and experience, with some having been involved in procurement for decades, others just a few years. When selecting our interviewees, we also paid particular attention to what may be called building and construction departments. The building and construction sector is characterised by complex procurement practices and, for this reason, all local governments in our sample were organised so that the department responsible for those issues employed their own procurers. Therefore, we wanted to include at least one interviewee from the building and construction sector of the organisation in each of the local governments. However, in one of them this was not possible.

Swedish local government also utilises municipal companies, which are public organisations, run as businesses competing on a market and therefore they are subject to special forms of legislation that structure the way they are set up (Erlingsson et al. 2014). Some of the most important municipal companies are public housing companies that together own about half of all rental apartments in Sweden. They are important actors in terms of public procurement since they, like the departments of building and construction, plan their own procurement processes and employ their own staff. Therefore, we included interviews with procurers in public housing companies.

In sum, we are dealing with local governments that are important public organisations with slightly different ways of organising public procurement. The difference is most evident in the location of the public procurement unit within the organisation, and more specifically, if it is centralised or not. The largest one does not have a centralised public procurement unit, while the others have a centralised model in place. In short, this means that in the largest local governments procurers are spread out over different departments which made us choose a large department working with development issues within the city as our initial source for interviewees. In the others, the selection of interviewees was more straight-forward since we could start with the centrally located public procurement unit involved in most of the local government's procurement.

The semi-structured interviews were carried out by a team of four researchers, lasted around one to one and a half hour, and were recorded. The interview guides captured four topics as we asked interviewees about their views on the evolution and current state of the procurement function within the organisation, their interpretation of the political steering of the procurement practices, how they perceive building and construction in relation to procurement and what they consider important challenges in the future for the practice of public procurement in local government. The most common set up was for two researchers to be present during the interviews together with one interviewee, although this varied in a few instances. Two of the interviews had two respondents present, which means that while the number of interviewees is 16, the total number of interviews is 14. In addition to recordings we kept notes that later could be shared with the research team and discussions among the team were ongoing. In the following analysis, when quotes are used, they have been

translated into English and corrected somewhat to make the spoken language work better in written text.

Public Procurement in Swedish Local Government: Three Salient Themes

The interviews provided us with a rich material that spans over a number of public procurement issues and features. Among these articulations some are more salient than others. Here we wish to draw attention to three major themes that are prevalent among the interviewees as they reflect upon the role of public procurement within their organisations and in relation to their own positions. We reconstructed these three themes through a retroductive coding process where the movement back and forth between our initial assumptions and the data resulted in a set of codes and categories that together relate to what we label *organisational set-up and increased political ambitions; market language and thinking; and consultancy and shifting roles for civil servants*. In addition to these three themes we also highlight what we have labelled a *context narrative* that concerns the expansion of public procurement as such both in frequency and importance. For all of the interviewees, this context narrative was important and recurrent in that they used it to interpret and make sense of their current situation.

In short, these major themes are prevalent and manifest to a high degree in the data and they also structure, steer and guide other topics in more latent ways. Hence, while the themes do not encompass or exhaust the data, we argue that they are important, and indeed central, for understanding the general discussion on public procurement in Swedish local government today. As such, they both express and are expressions of the general changes in Swedish local government relating to NPM and marketisation over the last decades.

Context Narrative: Expanded Procurement

On the basis of the experiences of public sector development and ongoing research on the issue of expanding procurement, this observation is not particularly surprising or a very important finding in itself. However, when asked to reflect about their present work in public procurement, the interviewees kept referring to what they perceived as the significance of expansion and the considerable impact it has had on the forms and practices of public procurement over the last ten or fifteen years. Some articulations even limited this time frame to the last couple of years as they described this as a very intense period and argued that we are in the midst of an ongoing expansion. Indeed, as stated by one of our interviewees, we have recently experienced the dawn of a new era concerning public procurement in local government:

I started this position in 2008 as Vice President for the procurement unit [...] and so much has changed! When I started there were 24 of us, now we are close to 60. I mean the world we were working in back then in 2008... It was a dawn of a sort.

In all of the four local governments the interviewees highlighted an expansion of public procurement in terms of money, personnel and also in terms of the sectors where it is applied. Thus, falling back on reasoning such as in the quote above is often something that underpins the other themes, and in this sense, we argue that the context narrative is important.

As already mentioned above, it is not just the actual numbers that have increased, but public procurement has also expanded in more qualitative ways. Not least, our interviewees gave accounts of how they struggled to handle, and implement, new policies and strategies relating to public procurement that were increasingly complex and comprehensive as the focus of procurement moved from lowest price to more complex political considerations.

Thus, in the interviews, respondents reflected upon the impact of new drafts and plans for public procurement strategies and how these are entangled and nested in other policies at different scales. The new public procurement legislation (LOU) that became effective in 2017, and the work leading up to it, is of importance for the everyday practice of actors in local government procurement. One of our interviewees argued that today's practice cannot even be compared with what was going on just a few years ago:

I mean you can't even compare [with before] at all. It's a real journey that we have made from a time where we were focusing on 'lowest price', and then, I mean, quality starts to become part of it so 'lowest price at best quality'. Now it's like lowest price is something of a bad word [...] So we have gone from 'lowest price' to 'sustainable society'. [...] We work with social responsibility, we work with ethical demands, we work with ecological... we work with everything there is.

It is clear that public procurement increasingly functions as a governmental tool that is intended to administer, direct and control actions related to an array of political goals and ambitions in ways that it did not do before. In short, we may speak of an expanded process of marketisation in the sense that new forms of markets are produced not only in terms of products and services, but also through rules and functions and in an overall confidence in the market as a means to reach political objectives. As mentioned, this context narrative is often used as a 'fall back' for the interviewees as they reflected upon their present situation. This applies in particular to what we identify as our first salient theme, organisational set-up and increased political ambitions directed towards public procurement.

Theme 1: Organisational Set-Up and Increased Political Ambitions

In the wake of the expansion follows new rationalities and logics that influence public procurement practices and intertwine with other parts of the administration and spread throughout the local government organisation. Organisational change is a prominent theme in our interviews and while the interviewees mainly focused on their immediate organisational environment rather than the entire local government organisation, their reflections also tell us something about important changes in the wider organisational context.

We observe two different expressions of this theme among our interviewees. *First*, they gave accounts of the significant changes they have experienced during the last years. This generally means that interviewees described different forms of tangible organisational restructuring processes, often along the lines of centralisation. In short, in three of the local governments, centralised and specialised procurement units consisting of expertise expected to serve the rest of the local government had been set up. As stated earlier, only the largest local government lacked such a centralised unit. However, we argue that this, at least to some extent, is a question of scale. While no central unit had been set-up,

interviewees still observed that the organisation around procurement practices had changed and been centralised in the departments.

Thus, all interviewees talked about centralisation and of a struggle within their department to find a good setup for procurement functions. More centralised functions were often motivated by a need for particular public procurement competences, especially the need to recruit judicial expertise. This, in turn, our interviewees argued, was driven by the expansion that had evolved contemporary public procurement into a complex practice where different, sometimes conflicting, goals were to be realised, while still following a detailed and complicated legislation. New institutional structures were, or are being, constructed with corresponding development of administrative staff and expertise. This was, according to one of our interviewees, a tall order:

You could say that our organisation stands on three legs today. We have one leg that concerns procurement of consultants, one leg that concerns procurement of building and construction and we have one administrative leg. This is really a lot to develop and maintain. We have to make it safe for our contractors while at the same time also make ourselves feel safe by, you know, being on top of the latest statistics, follow ups and everything so that you can really engage with the procurement. It has also been hard to get the central organisation to really back us up. It's just costs they say, as for administrative personnel, but I mean, it's really, really a lot of administration involved in public procurement, and infinite documentation...

We have identified increasing political ambitions as a *second* and connected expression of this theme. The interviewees argued that politicians today want to get more out of procurement in the sense that procurement is increasingly expected to facilitate the realisation of social and environmental goals. Political goals such as reinforcing social responsibility through public procurement is something that is discussed extensively in the interviews. It is also a struggle to implement public procurement that facilitates these types of political goals. This increase in political ambition can be illustrated by a politician that perceived public procurement as a tool for realising political objectives:

It started as an objective from the local government at the central level, or rather, it is more part of a current dilemma where we have a lot of people who are not really in the labour market at all, and this is a social problem that contributes to all forms of problems in society, like segregation and such issues. So, a political interest arose and we asked what can we do to create job opportunities for people who are far from the labour market? Since we spend so much money through procurement, it was natural to see if we could do something this way [...] and so it became an objective that 50 percent of all service procurements should involve 'social responsibility' [...] this is really a clear signal to those involved in public procurement...

In practice, this could mean that procurement contracts specify that entrepreneurs must employ a given number of unemployed people as part of the contract with the local government or that certain groups such as immigrants, young people or people with disabilities are catered for in specific ways through the contract. Some of our interviewees found this challenging to realise in

practice and something that added to the overall complexity of their everyday work. Political goals focusing on environmental issues, on the other hand, seemed to be more accepted, particularly among those working in the departments of building and construction and in public housing companies.

Thus, taken together, our interviewees conveyed the concrete effects that expanding public procurement have on the organisational structure. While local governments may be set up in various ways to handle public procurement, it is clear that they are now working actively to find ways to make it work in line with strategies and political goals that are broader and more challenging than ever before. Another aspect of the development already touched upon is that of market influences that we addressed in our second salient theme discussed below.

Theme 2: Market Language and Thinking

We also find a less tangible, but still important, expression of market language and thinking among our interviewees. It relates to the expanded process of marketisation that public procurement is part of. One lucid expression of this is that many of our interviewees used a clearly 'business oriented' language that is quite far from what we have encountered interviewing civil servants in other circumstances. The language is filled with terms and concepts borrowed from the business world and our interviewees also highlighted the use of award ceremonies, best-practice networks and the need to distinguish themselves as assets for external actors when it came to doing 'good business'. In this context, interviewees sometimes expressed how they would like to be able to work with more focus on the business side of things, rather than having to deal with quite boring legal details:

I mean, precisely because you want to work with the deal and the business, but I mean it's so easy to just get stuck in interpretations of the law all the time. Like the law, obviously you should, you have like a process that you have to see to [...] but I think that [what matters] is to chase the best deal that you can get and make good business. [...] Some people here are like 'let's just specify hundreds of qualification criteria and then the bidders will just have to live with it'. But the days when we could act as if the bidders should be happy to deal with us are long gone.

The procurer in the quote above is also alluding to another way that this business mindset comes to life, most clearly in one of the local governments, namely in the explicit goal of being an 'attractive tenderer'. This means that they strive to be an organisation that can beat all other public organisations in terms of being the most desirable business partner for private companies with products and services being procured. The mindset is that they are in competition with other local governments and public organisations and must be, and remain, the most attractive public procurement organisation in order to succeed in procuring what they are aiming to procure. As one of our interviewees argued:

Maybe someone else has got something that we don't have, but in the end, we need to attract our consultants and entrepreneurs. That is, they need to choose us before The Swedish Transport Administration and they should do that because they really want to work with us and because that would be both fun and profitable. It shouldn't cost them

any unnecessary time or resources and we should have a very business-like relationship. And when I say business-like, I mean it's one thing to attract them during a single tendering, so that they actually place a bid, but we also need to make sure that we maintain our business-like conduct during the entire process. We have really long projects and contracts and so the businesses will be with us a long time and we must ask how are we relating to each other? How do we represent ourselves, how do we cause costs for each other and what understandings do our procurers really have of the business ...?

Intertwined with this changing form and focus of the organisation is our interviewees accounts of the importance of judicial aspects and the prevalence of consultants in contemporary public procurement. This is the third salient theme reconstructed from the interviews, and discussed in the section below.

Theme 3: Consultancy and New Roles for Civil Servants

For our interviewees the presence of consultants and consultancy within the public organisation in various forms is completely normalised and very common. Indeed, one of the most important categories of procurement in Swedish government today is the procurement of consultants (Sporrong 2014). Sometimes the situation becomes remarkably tangled and complex when local governments have consultants working as procurement experts with the goal to manage yet another procurement process aiming at procuring more consultants. While this is common, there are also differences in opinion among our interviewees as to how large the role of consultants should be within their organisation. In one organisation our interviewee described a 'consultancy shift' aiming to phase out consultants and employ 'inhouse' experts instead:

Our highest ranking official has decided that we should employ our own people to manage our own money, but it's a competence thing as well. Even though we cannot simply exchange people on the spot, the decision has been made that all procurers in this office shall be employed, not procurement consultants. It's an issue of trust and loyalty and, in addition, with too many consultants we cannot build inhouse expertise and competence.

At the same time, the interviewee recognised that it will be hard to work without consultants. Often, particularly in complex procurement processes such as building and construction, the local government simply does not have the expertise needed to draft contracts and oversee the procurement process from start to finish. Moreover, finding and hiring people with the right expertise is not only expensive but also difficult as procurement consultancy is more lucrative than being employed by local government. Hence, the perception is that public organisations must compete and offer an attractive workplace where interesting procurements are being made so that the most prominent experts will choose to work with them.

Therefore, consultants will likely continue to work on short term contracts to do procurement work for local government, our interviewees argued. These consultants can move in and out of various projects and work alongside civil servants, yet at the same time sit outside the public sector. This causes issues in relation to the normal administrative hierarchy that sometimes make steering and control difficult:

As I said, these 100, maybe there are only 100 here who work directly with these issues, but then there are 500 consultants, and how do you govern them? I mean, you cannot give orders to anyone since you live in a contractual relationship with them and a contract is a very, how should I put it, in some ways, equal relationship.

Some of our interviewees talked about working with procurement in the public sector as part of a career strategy rather than as a long-term civil servant commitment. They may start off working with a private organisation bidding for contracts offered by local government. They may then work for a few years in the public sector gaining experience with the goal of returning to the private sector better equipped and competitive for more senior positions.

In addition, the presence of consultants and consultancy in our material is also connected to the role of judicial expertise and the function of lawyers in public procurement processes. Many of the consultants are judicial experts, sometimes employed by large consultancy firms specialising not only in providing the experts for the public organisations but also in providing courses, training, seminars and networking opportunities for procurers working in both public and private organisations. One of our interviewees argued with frustration that public procurement had been taken over by lawyers and law firms:

So, instead of trying to face it and go for trying to become better purchasers and to really educate the purchasing side they have complicated the law so much, which is extraordinary, that the only ones who make money on this are the lawyers. [...] this used to be an arena where the core was that you acted as a client and a purchaser and you would have the lawyers as a support function. Now, it's like it's the other way around, I think it's so obvious and so sad to see. Like every course that was provided by one of the large lawyer-consultancy firms, it was not an education focusing on the client or purchaser, it was just lawyers everywhere, and sky-high costs...

When we asked managers as well as the procurers themselves what the most common background for a procurer in local government is today, they mentioned law, business and engineering. This could apply to previous work experience as well as educational background and while this is not a problem per se, it can be hard to find people who understand what working as a civil servant in a public organisation means and what the values involved are/should be. As one of our interviewees explained:

I think that many sales-people think like 'hey I can work on the other side since I know how to sell to them'. Then I tell them that what they think of is an entirely different competence, being a good sales-person. ... So, I mean public procurement and purchasing ... you need to have an understanding of a politically governed organisation. I mean there is a lot to understand. For instance, that we work under the Public Access to Information and Secrecy Act, that we are accountable in relation to tax payers and that, I mean, you are a civil servant.

The role of the public procurer within changing local government organisations is neither simple nor uniform. Articulations within our material point towards an increased judicial influence and a shift of important functions to private consultancy firms. As described, some of our interviewees spoke of consultancy

firms as the real winners in the ongoing expansions of public procurement in Swedish local government. Not only do they bid on profitable contracts, they are also, as stated above, the most prominent providers of competence, training and courses, modules and instruments that local government use in order to raise the competence of its staff. We argue that as a result of this development, it is useful to consider a possible shift in the role of the civil servant that deviates in significant ways from the long-standing ideals of Swedish local government with its Weberian legacy (for a broader discussion on this challenge see, Peters & Pierre 2018, chapter 3).

Concluding Discussion

The analysis presented above indicates that individuals within public procurement in Swedish local government perceive their profession as rapidly and profoundly evolving. The three themes we have identified highlight that this does not only concern rapid organisational change but, more importantly, the development of public procurement into a governmental tool that gives rise to a number of important governing effects. Public procurement is an instrument that rests upon the rationalities of marketisation and competition. However, it also actively advances these rationalities, sustains and reinforces them, providing the development with new directions and content. In the following, we wish to underline what we find particularly important in the three themes that we have discussed above.

First, our observations of contextual changes are very much in line with research observing how civil servants find themselves in the midst of a complex and often contradictory setting. Different roles for civil servants emerge and various coping strategies may form as they try to meet shifting and incompatible demands in fluid organisational contexts. For instance, Poulsen (2007), in her description of Danish public administration, describes present regimes as comprised of sedimented layers of values, roles and virtues in which older norms from one layer intersect with new ones. Such a description is certainly viable beyond Denmark, but perhaps Nordic countries in particular are experiencing a more pronounced clash between new modes of public management facilitated by NPM and the traditional public administration ideal, especially connected to the social democratic welfare state era (cf. Peters & Pierre 2018: 28). Indeed, literature on the changing contexts for civil servants stresses the fact that scholars need to pay more attention to emerging roles and functions for civil servants when trying to understand their relationship to broad themes such as democracy or efficiency (cf. Hysing & Olsson 2012; Johansson, Lindgren & Montin 2018; Karlsson & Olsson 2018).

The case presented here provides some specific clarifications of contemporary administrative practice that are increasingly important. Particularly, it shows how a growing number of civil servants have to balance their duty of being responsive towards political demands, keeping in line with traditional Weberian values while expected to cater to, and get involved with, markets and private actors to such an extent that they feel a need to be competitive and help foster the best organisation *for* the private actors taking part in the procurement process so that they can attract the best companies and consultants to come and work with or for them.

In this way, a focus on public procurement highlights new dimensions of what it means to be a civil servant today working in a complex environment

permeated with market logics, rationales and operating modes. Thus, the existing literature investigating the functions and implications of a managerialist state could benefit from an explicit focus on procurement as a practice and procurers as civil servants (e.g. Brodtkin 2011; Pollitt 2016).

Second, while perhaps not a conclusion of its own, but rather more of a supplement to the points noted above, we still find it important to underline the remarkable dearth of research focusing on public procurement as an element of marketisation, particularly in the Swedish case. As illustrated by studies focusing on other aspects of marketisation in Sweden (e.g. Madestam, Sundström & Bergström, 2018; Granberg, 2018), it is reasonable to expect that this rationale will impact on the public administration in profound ways, not only in terms of organisational structures and focus but including the role of civil servants (cf. Brown, 2015; Johansson, Lindgren & Montin, 2018). Assuming that markets are not essential entities that exist independent of social relations, but rather that they have to be actively made and produced (Çalışkan & Callon, 2009; 2010; McKenzie, Muniesa & Siu, 2007; Furusten, 2015), one could argue that a significant activity for bureaucrats today is to actually make, or at least facilitate, markets (Granberg 2018). As this is increasingly becoming a core function within the local government, it is vital for scholars to study this feature in much greater detail analysing its immediate effects and potential long-term outcomes on public administration.

Third, arguing along the lines of Swedish political scientist Lennart Lundqvist (1998) and others (cf. Hysing & Olsson 2012; Johansson, Lindgren & Montin 2018), there are normative reasons to pay close attention to how public procurement facilitates a context where the lines between civil servants and market actors are becoming significantly blurred. The saturation of market logics and rationales that can be observed in general also takes place through the involvement of consultants and the movement of individuals back and forth between the private and public sector. Most likely, this will have an impact on the practices of civil servants and their perpetual making of public administration.

As a concluding remark, we suggest that public procurement and its relation to civil servants, public administration, politics and democracy should be followed up in more detailed research studies. In particular, we note that the blurring of public-private lines and the influx of market values in local government merit further studies and that public procurement should be an integral part of such studies.

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