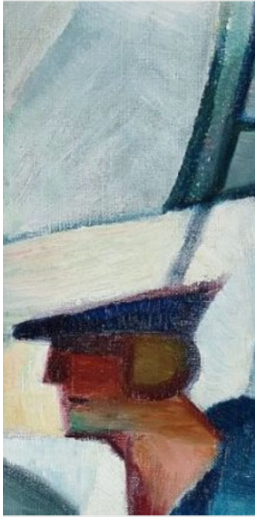


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Seminar #1. Automated industry in the Nordic countries

Summary

Isacson provided a historical overview of automation in Swedish, and, to a lesser extent, other Nordic countries', industry, focusing both on conditions for workers as well as on ideas and visions of automatization and its societal impacts within the government, industry and labor movement. His presentation spanned the period 1930–2020, focusing in particular on:

- Industry-led initiatives
- Cooperation and later conflict between the labor movement and business leaders
- Contrasting automated production with emerging low-wage labor gig economy
- The prospects of artificial intelligence in the light of the history of automatization

Based on Swedish history of automation, Isacson described the need for more comparative work about developments in different Nordic countries.

Paulsen related Isacson's work on industry automation to more expansive ambitions of computerizing society. The discussion also dwelled on how to formulate a Nordic collaborative model for automation that increases productivity without deskilling the workforce. In particular the 1970s was discussed as a watershed for new practices and philosophies of automation, including initiatives towards democratization and humanization of work. This discussion ventured toward how such initiatives were “co-opted” by management and consultants in the following decades.

Speculations

The seminar participants discussed how and why previously dominant collaborations between governments, trade unions and business leadership had been disrupted during the 1990s. For example, the influence of economic crises and how these might relate to prospects of organizing automation in the present.

Several participants reasoned around discussed how automation, and robots, differ from the possible impacts that artificial intelligence (AI) might have on industry and in turn power relations between actors who historically have sought to influence automation, e.g. government officials, politicians, union leaders and business executives. How are humans to live

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as humans rather than as robots? Or is it rather that humans are again changing back into animals as our interests and behaviors become increasingly calculated through algorithmic analysis of user data?

One aspect of Swedish industrial development during mid-twentieth century is the influx of Finnish migrant workers, and later numerous other ethnic minorities. How does historical immigrant labor differ from present-day low-wage gig economy and is immigration and automatization still a complicated relationship? In particular, how has trade unions and the labor movement related to the unionization of new ethnic minorities? And, on a more general level, how has Nordic techno-optimism influenced and been influenced by migration?

How are other historical processes likely to influence the relationship between organized labor and automation, e.g. ambitions of climate policies to decarbonize industry?

To what degree does the distribution of imaginaries and visions surrounding automatization (and AI) in Nordic societies change during the twentieth century? Is the present-day societal discourse more preoccupied with automation than previous ones? And if so, how does this more imaginary way of dealing with automatization influence the way that automatization is carried out in society? For example, could Nordic societies propose new professions working with AI changes – a form of ombudsman – to help articulate a new social contract that reflects what rights, protection, goods, welfare and social order that workers and citizens get in exchange for the power and freedom that they surrender to AI?

Johan Gärdebo

Kasper Hedegård Schiølin

Mattias Wiggberg

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