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Memory Work, Memory Politics and the Centennial of Women’s Suffrage in Sweden

1. A jubilee for democracy
There is something magical about a centennial, marking one hundred years since something worth commemorating happened. The Swedish centennial of universal and equal suffrage for women and men officially began on 17 December 2018, as an integral part of a jubilee on democracy. The Swedish parliament decided to allow the jubilee to run until January 2022, a little more than three years, celebrating what was soon labelled ‘the democratic breakthrough’. The jubilee marks the process of fulfilling the promise of democracy. According to the narrative framework, the process started with the extraordinary parliamentary sessions in late December 1918 and is considered complete by January 1922, when the first elected women took their seats in parliament.¹

In 2019, a special issue of the journal “Arbetarhistoria” [Labour History] on the suffrage reform was launched. The editorial of the journal poses a valid question surrounding the centennial organised by the Swedish parliament: what is the significance of women’s political enfranchisement in a democracy and how is women’s suffrage represented in the national memory, produced during the jubilee? Instead of joining in with the celebratory choir that is typical during jubilees, the journal focused on those voting restrictions that remained after the electoral reforms.² In the editorial entitled “All these Jubilees”, the editor and historian, Silke Neusinger, commented on the ongoing national celebration:

“Last year the Swedish jubilee for democracy was inaugurated, commemorating the fact that the vast majority of Swedish women achieved both the right to vote and to stand for election. [...] While the parliament was celebrating this jubilee of democracy, located in the former Second Chamber [in parliament], with the launching of an anthology, the holding of speeches and a fine

² Swedish citizens formally excluded from suffrage were: until 1922 men who had not fulfilled their military service; until 1937 convicted persons; until 1945 persons dependent on social aid or in a state of bankruptcy and until 1989 adults that had been declared as legally minor. See Annika Berg, Martin Ericsson and Fia Sundevall, Rösträtt för alla? Begränsningar i rösträtten efter 1921 [Suffrage for all? Suffrage restrictions after 1921], in: Ulrika Holgersson and Lena Wängnerud eds., Rösträttsens århundrade: Kampen, utvecklingen och framtiden för demokratin i Sverige [The century of suffrage. The struggle, the development and the future of democracy in Sweden], Stockholm 2018. See also www.allmanrostratt.se/english for a presentation of the ongoing research program “Universal Suffrage? Voting Restrictions and Disenfranchisement in Sweden after 1921”; access: February 25, 2020.
The political paradox in Swedish gender equality policy did not escape Neunsinger. According to her, the centennial of women’s suffrage seemed merely a symbol of the fulfilment of democracy with no real commitment to gender equality and other feminist demands, not least since parliament at the same time closed its own agency to implement gender equality. Furthermore, Neunsinger points out that the ways in which historic events are commemorated often show how the past is mediated for the specific needs of the present. Sometimes, she writes, “[j]ubilees and commemoration years are used, even misused, in ways that obscure the real meaning of the commemorated event”. Neunsinger stresses the need for jubilees to be situated in their complex and broad historical context in order to not distort the historical events being commemorated. She argues that the centennial of women’s suffrage in Sweden is being used as a proxy for safeguarding and reinforcing general democratic values rather than as a commemoration of women’s political citizenship as part of a longer and broader feminist struggle. In other words, a central achievement in the history of feminism runs the risk of being situated outside the perspectives of political justice, equality and, in fact, democracy. This is a central concern of feminist historiography, and an issue that will be further explored in this article.

In order to discuss how (in what sense) the centennial of women’s suffrage is commemorated during the jubilee, this article critically analyses how the national jubilee has been organised, with a focus on the main actor: Swedish parliament. Since the jubilee will run until January 2022, commemorative events are, at the time of writing, still ongoing. However, while not having come to an end, distinct commemorative trends can be gleaned from the material used for this study. Analysing an ongoing jubilee provides an opportunity to investigate memory in the making, showing how meanings of the past are negotiated when a centennial is organised. In line with the arguments of Katharine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, analysing an

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3 Silke Neunsinger, Alla dessa jubileer [All these jubilees], in: Arbetarhistoria [Labour History], 44, 170–171 (2019) 2–3, 3. At this time, Sweden was still without a proper government, due to the inconclusive results in the last parliamentary election.


5 Neunsinger, Alla dessa jubileer, see note 3, 3.
ongoing jubilee gives us a chance to observe the ongoing politics of memory, how “memory operates in the public sphere, and even more fundamentally how it gets there”.6

This article will enquire into the use of the enfranchisement of women in national (but inevitably also Nordic and, more widely still, transnational) memory work, as well as the significance of suffrage in the historiography of women’s emancipation and feminism.7 What specific memory about women’s suffrage and the struggle for women’s rights and justice is produced during the jubilee? What importance is given to women’s rights, feminism and gender equality in a national and public narrative about democracy? Furthermore, what possibilities are there to, with research-based knowledge, contribute in a national jubilee like this, and who is given an opportunity to contribute? The article will conclude with a discussion of the need to relate the memory of women’s suffrage to a broader narrative about democracy and to the history of feminism in Sweden, in order not to produce a partial story about women’s suffrage as the mere fulfilment of democracy and gender equality. I argue for the need to critically examine how the cultural memory of the early women’s movement is mediated and used in a national narrative. As has been stressed by memory studies scholars, such as, among others, Wulf Kansteiner and Klas-Göran Karlsson, it is difficult, if not impossible, for scholars to remain entirely outside the cultural framework of memory politics. This, however, ought not to hinder us from remaining level-headed and posing critical questions informed by the rigours of historical analysis, rather than getting swept away by ongoing memory work and the glamour of centennials.8

7 See Astrid Erll, Cultural Memory Studies. An Introduction, in: Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning eds., A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies, Berlin 2010, 1–18; Erll, Memory, see note 4; Brunow, Remediating Transcultural Memory, see note 4, 22–24; Ulla Manns, Feminismens Pantheon. Kollektivt minne, identitet och förestålld gemenskap [The pantheon of feminism. Collective memory, identity and imagined communities], in: Ulla Manns and Fia Sundevall eds., Methods, Interventions and Reflections. Report from the X Nordic women’s and gender history conference, Bergen (Norway), August 9–12, 2012, Stockholm 2014, 122–131; Ulla Manns, Minnet av kvinnor rösträtt: Jubileer och aktivister formar historien [The memory of women’s suffrage. Jubilees and activists shaping history], in: Holgersson/Wängnerud, Rösträttsens århundrade, see note 2, 179–193. In short, the concept of transnational memory is developed in order to stress the inevitability of all memory production as something not isolated within a homogenous nation state, but as something in constant flux. See Brunow, Remediating Transcultural Memory, see note 4, 21–27; also: Erll, Memory, see note 4, on transculturality. On the use of women’s suffrage in Swedish historiography of feminism see Manns, Minnet av kvinnor rösträtt.
The sources for this study are primarily gathered from the parliamentary jubilee committee, up to late summer 2020. They include documents from the official opening of the jubilee in December 2018, study material for schools such as the first edition of the magazine “Demokratin står aldrig stilla” [Democracy never stands still], alongside the committee’s official website www.firademokratin.riksdagen.se [Celebrate democracy]. Furthermore, other complementary sources are scholarly anthologies, such as “Rösträttens århundrade: Kampen, utvecklingen och framtiden för demokratin i Sverige” [The century of suffrage. The struggle, the development and the future of democracy in Sweden] and “Demokratins framtid” [The future of democracy], in addition to the website Demokrati100.se, conferences, special issues and calls for papers in public magazines and scholarly journals.

2. When to celebrate

In 2012, a parliamentary motion about the need to commemorate the centennial of a democratic breakthrough in Sweden was submitted and passed. No specific year was stipulated, though what was stressed was the importance to celebrate. A committee was soon appointed, led by the speaker of parliament, with one member from all eight political parties in Parliament, consisting of as many women as men. The committee’s assignment was to plan for a jubilee and public outreach. It was named Kommittéen för högtidlighållandet av demokratins införande [the Committee for the holding of celebrations to commemorate Sweden’s entry into democracy]. It was soon decided that the jubilee was to run between 17 December 2018 until January 2022. The main reason for starting as early as 2018 is due to the historic importance given to the extraordinary parliamentary sessions of 17 December 1918, described as the day when a real breakthrough for democracy occurred. At the inauguration of the jubilee, the parliamentary speaker explained that 17 December 1918 in fact marks the

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9 The motion was written by Leif Pagrotsky, the Social Democratic Party, former minister, in: Sveriges riksdag [Swedish parliament], at: https://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/arende/betankande/allmanna-helgdagar-mm_H00IKU16/; access July 20, 2020.
10 See Riksdagen firar demokratin 2018–2022, see note 1. Due to the election in September 2018 a new speaker of parliament was elected. Andreas Norlén, from the Conservative Party replaced Urban Ahlin, from the Social Democratic Party. The government in place up until the election in September 2018, a coalition between the Social Democratic Party and the Green Party, also appointed a committee for strengthening democracy. See Demokratin 100 år – samling för en stark demokrati [Democracy 100 years – uniting for a strong democracy], at: https://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/dokument/kommittedirektiv/demokratin-100-ar---samling-for-en-stark-demokrati_H6B153/; access: July 1, 2020. Since the committee is not involved in the planning of the jubilee it falls out of scope of this article.
birth of modern, that is democratic, Sweden. During the jubilee, this is repeated in other presentations of the committee and often framed in a dramatic manner, for example film-clips showing riots in the streets during autumn 1918. It is notable that votes for women in parliament were just one of the many issues on the political agenda at the extraordinary sessions of 1918 and no formal decision about votes for women was made. However, the resulting agreement is presented as a grand victory over the less progressive first chamber, which had blocked reforms for several years.

Why did the Swedish celebrations start as early as 2018? Why not simply focus on 2021, the year marking the centenary of women’s suffrage? It is notable that previous jubilees organised by the Swedish parliament have focused on different years, but never on 1918. While the 50th and 75th jubilees commemorated 1919 when the first formal decision was made, the 80th remembered 1921, the year when the political reform was completed. On this occasion, why start the commemorative events already in 2018, allowing the jubilee to extend all the way up to early 2022? The decision about when to celebrate and how long for appears to be inextricably linked to the question of exactly what to highlight in the commemorations: a parliamentary process that gave birth to democratic Sweden, rather than the long feminist struggle for women’s enfranchisement.

As mentioned above, 2018 marks the centennial of the extra-parliamentary sessions held in both chambers in late December 1918. During these sessions several important decisions were made and passed in order to dampen what was an increasingly volatile political situation;

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13 See Torbjörn Nilsson, Sista akten i rösträttsdramat [The final act in the suffrage drama], at: www.demokrati100.se/sista-akten-i-rostrattsdramat/; access: February 21, 2020; the magazine “Demokratin står aldrig stilla” [Democracy never stands still], printed and produced by the Swedish parliament, Studiematerial [study material], at: http://firademokratin.riksdagen.se/studiematerial/studiematerialet/#Magasin-Demokratin-st%C3%A5r-aldrig-stilla/; access: February 25, 2020; Andreas Norlén, Fördö [Prologue], in: Katarina Barrling and Sören Holmberg eds., Demokratins framtid [The future of democracy], Stockholm 2018.

there was fear of a socialist overtake in Sweden (as elsewhere in Europe). Among the
decisions taken was to grant universal and equal suffrage to women and men in municipal
elections. In 1909, men had already gained universal and equal suffrage for parliamentary
elections (to the second chamber) and in 1918 both chambers came to the agreement to extend
this reform to women, something that the first chamber had rejected for several years.\textsuperscript{15} Since
the right for women to vote (and to run for election) required constitutional change, the
reform had to be approved twice in both chambers at ordinary sessions, with a parliamentary
election in between. The promise made in 1918 was kept, the bill was taken up again and
approved at the ordinary sessions in 1919. After the elections of 1920, a second approval of
the reform was made in 1921. In autumn of that year, the first parliamentary elections in
which women could participate were held and in 1922 the first women took their seats in
parliament – four in the second chamber and one in the first.\textsuperscript{16}

From the perspective of the history of feminism and women’s emancipation, celebrating 1918
seems odd. After all, those special parliamentary sessions only resulted in an agreement; there
were no guarantees that the reform bill would eventually pass later on.\textsuperscript{17} Therefore, it is
certainly appropriate to ask why the Swedish parliament decided to make 1918 the starting
point for the jubilee. The question of when exactly to celebrate the centennial of women’s
suffrage is, in a Nordic context, of particular interest for the Swedish case. In comparison to
other Nordic countries, Sweden clearly lagged behind. In Finland, women already gained
universal and equal suffrage in 1906, at the same time as men. In Norway, women acquired
the right to vote in 1913, and in Denmark and Iceland in 1915. Whether Sweden was trying to
bridge that gap by starting the jubilee in 2018 rather than 2021 is a matter of speculation and
outside the scope of this article. Nonetheless, by choosing to commemorate 1918 the Swedish
parliament committed to celebrating for several years. The decision to start in 2018 also

\textsuperscript{15} For a concise recapitulation about the reform, see Fia Sundevall, Den allmänna rösträtten – när infördes den?
[Universal suffrage – when did it occur?], at: www.demokrati100.se/den-allmanna-rostratten-nar-infordes-den/;
access: February 21, 2020. From 1866 to 1970, Sweden had a bicameral parliament. It replaced the parliament of
four estates. Paradoxically, it was not until this reform that women were formally excluded from suffrage. See
Holgersson/Wängnerud, Rösträttens århundrade, see note 2. Elections to the first chamber were indirect, via
municipal elections.

\textsuperscript{16} See Sundevall, Den allmänna rösträtten, see note 15. The first women elected were, in the first chamber,
Kerstin Hesselgren (Liberal), and in the second chamber Nelly Thüring (Social Democrat), Elisabeth Tamm
(Liberal), Bertha Wellin (Conservative), and Agda Östlund (Social Democrat).

\textsuperscript{17} Historians Karin Kvist Geverts and Torbjörn Nilsson contend that the promise made at the extra-parliamentary
session was in fact binding, referring to the honesty of the MPs, see Kleberg har rätt – och fel om hur
rösträttsåret bör firas [Kleberg is right – and wrong about how the suffrage centennial ought to be celebrated], at:
affected other groups who had to decide whether to participate from the outset or wait until later.

3. What to celebrate

The decision about what exactly to celebrate turns out to have been a decisive factor for the visibility and problematisation of gender issues and women’s citizenship in the parliamentary commemorations. From the very beginning, the major focus was on democracy in general and its so-called breakthrough, attributed to December 1918. A jubilee that celebrated democratic values was regarded as very timely when considering the present political situation in Sweden. With this broader scope, women’s political citizenship was only one of several achievements to be commemorated.

One group was particularly affected by the parliamentary decision to start the jubilee as early as 2018: the quite extensive group of Swedish gender researchers. They (or rather ‘we’) by and large consider the upcoming centennial as one about women’s suffrage and the history of feminism, and 1921 the year to be commemorated. Parallel to the parliamentary planning of the jubilee, some forty gender researchers gathered in August 2015 and set up “Forskarnätverket för rösträttsjubiléet 2021”, a scholarly network for the suffrage jubilee. The network decided to contact the parliamentary committee and let them know that there was a group of scholars interested in contributing to any scheduled events. Furthermore, it was decided that an international conference should be held on the theme of gender and politics from a global and historical perspective in 2021. Therefore, Riksbankens jubileumsfond (one of the main funding bodies for the humanities in Sweden) was contacted.

The network soon identified the need for further research. A national research conference was therefore organised in 2016, “Allmän och lika rösträtt? Historiekritiska perspektiv på

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18 See Sveriges riksdag [Swedish parliament], at: https://riksdagen.se/sv/dokument-lagar/arende/betankande/allmanna-helgdagar-mm_H001KU16/html/; access: July 1, 2020; Riksdagen firar demokratin, see note 1.
19 The meeting was held in conjunction with the XI Nordic Women’s and Gender History Conference in Stockholm.
20 Minnesanteckningar förda vid konstituerande mötet för Forskarnätverket för rösträttsjubiléet 2021 [Notes for the founding meeting of the Research Network for the Suffrage Jubilee 2021], August 21, 2015. Notes taken by professor Ulrika Holgersson, History Department, Lund University. Private possession. The documentation of these network meetings was previously accessible at the homepage of SKOGH: Sveriges kvinno- och genus historiker. Unfortunately, the homepage has since been closed.
medborgarskap och demokrati” [Universal and equal suffrage? Critico-historical perspectives on citizenship and democracy]. Since the upcoming centennial would certainly interest the public, one of the keynote speakers invited was Krista Cowman, who had served as a historical expert on the production of the motion picture “Suffragette” (2015). This conference later showed itself to have had an important networking function, not least in gathering researchers for the anthology “Rösträttens århundrade” [The century of suffrage], but also for initiating new research collaborations.21

Representatives from the parliamentary committee were invited to the 2016 national conference and attended some of the sessions. However, this did not result in any invitation of gender researchers to participate in their own anthology “Demokratins framtid” [The future of democracy] or other related collaborations. Since parliament had already decided to have an extended jubilee, starting with the political events of 1918, gender researchers had to adhere to this timeframe in order to take advantage of the window of opportunity that these celebrations afforded. The parliament-organised jubilee would go on regardless of our participation. A decision was therefore made to compile yet another anthology, which would focus on both the past – specifically the women’s movement, how parliamentary politics and gender issues had evolved since 1921 – as well as theorisations about future challenges. The result was the already mentioned “Rösträttens århundrade”.

A closer look at how the parliamentary committee has presented the jubilee shows in more detail what is being celebrated and how. Neither women nor suffrage – not to mention gender – is found in the name of the committee (Kommittéen för högtidlighållandet av demokratins införande – the Committee for the holding of celebrations to commemorate Sweden’s entry into democracy) nor in the name of the jubilee. The jubilee was named “Ja, må den leva! Demokratin uti hundrade år”. It is a paraphrase of a well-known birthday song in Swedish, roughly translated as: “May it live! Democracy, for a hundred years.” So clearly, the jubilee was presented as being about Swedish democracy in general and the celebration of the birth of modern Sweden.

21 One collaboration that was successful in getting funded is the multidisciplinary research program “Universal Suffrage? Voting Restrictions and Disenfranchisement in Sweden after 1921”. See https://www.allmanrostratt.se/english/; access: February 29, 2020. A total of three international symposia have since then been organized, to which renowned scholars in the field of suffrage, feminism and politics have been invited.
The narrative of a democratic breakthrough between 1918 and 1922 is a recurring one. The word breakthrough is not elaborated but signals a major change, a point of no return to a former repressive political system. A specific website promoting the parliamentary jubilee was set up, which, in its opening statement, mentions the period in question without making explicit reference to the centennial of women’s suffrage nor to the fact that women eventually gained political citizenship. Thus, the jubilee is introduced as follows:

“Parliament celebrates democracy between 2018 and 2022
Parliament marks the occasion of democracy’s breakthrough in Sweden with a jubilee on democracy that will run from 2018 until 2022. One hundred years ago the Swedish parliament enacted legislation that guaranteed universal and equal suffrage. The parliament will now mark this occasion of a democratic breakthrough in Sweden with a jubilee. The purpose is to increase knowledge about the history of democracy, its meaning and importance. It will seek also to arouse commitment to the importance of democracy, today and in the future. Jubilee events will take place between 2018 and 2022 in the house of parliament in Stockholm, in other parts of the country, as well as on the web and in social media.”

On the specific webpage devoted to the jubilee, www.firademokratin.riksdagen.se, the story is repeated in the same gender-neutral manner. The webpage states:

“Celebrate democracy!
It is one hundred years since Sweden became a democracy with universal and equal suffrage. Parliament will celebrate by making this history come alive, shedding light on different ideas about democracy, today and for the future. On this webpage you can find material about the celebration of democracy as well as information about where and when you can participate. We want to give you a warm welcome!”

In addition to these introductory words, there is a short film (2:46 in length), which provides a brief summary of the development of suffrage, following the story that has already been told. The film begins by recalling a time when Sweden’s parliament consisted of four estates; it ends with the passing of the 1921 political reforms that included women’s suffrage.

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22 Riksdagen firar demokratin 2018–2022, see note 1.
Alongside the webpage, study material for schools has been prepared in the form of a magazine entitled “Demokratin står aldrig stilla” [Democracy never stands still]. Even though some attention is paid to the enfranchisement of women, the significance of women’s suffrage or gender issues are hardly addressed or problematised. The ability to vote and run for parliament is neither contextualised in a wider discussion surrounding democracy in contemporary society nor in the context of the history of women’s rights and feminism. As a matter of fact, the history of feminism and gender equality is merely mentioned in passing. And where women’s suffrage is addressed, it is treated as something separate from other gender related issues or feminist visions.25

The tendency to overlook women’s historical agency, gender issues and the significance of political citizenship for women in the broader context of equality and social justice can also be found in the prologues of the two research anthologies that were prepared specifically for the jubilee. Both prologues were written by the parliamentary speaker, and as such, by a prominent national voice. In “Rösträttens århundrade” [The century of suffrage], the former Social Democratic speaker of parliament Urban Ahlin, who was in office until the last general election in mid-September 2018, co-wrote the text with Göran Blomqvist, the director of the anthology’s funding body, Riksbankens jubileumsfond. The prologue states that the anthology is first and foremost about suffrage, though it refrains from mentioning that the women’s suffrage centennial is imminent. Instead, democracy and suffrage, explored in gender-neutral terms, take centre-stage. From the perspective of cultural memory, it is noteworthy that the prologue does not try to cover up the fact that Sweden was comparatively late in extending suffrage to women in relation to other Nordic countries, and that several restrictions remained even after the reform.26 The anthology was edited by a historian and a political scientist, both of whom specialised in gender research, Ulrika Holgersson and Lena Wängnerud. The 460-page volume was suitable for public outreach: an elegant design, in hardcover with several illustrations and photographs; it covered a wide range of topics, including gender history as well as themes on EU politics, political representation, etc., all written by established

25 An update of this study material has been produced for autumn 2020. The analysis is based on the first edition.  
26 Urban Ahlin and Göran Blomqvist, Förord [Prologue], in: Holgersson/Wängnerud eds., Rösträttens århundrade, see note 2, 9–10.
scholars. The anthology was soon made available online as a free download. Later on, Riksbankens jubileumsfond also decided to hand out free paperback copies to teachers.27

The second anthology, “Demokratins framtid” [The future of democracy], was initiated and funded by parliament. Esteemed social scientists contributed with chapters on the future of democracy, mainly directed at a scholarly readership. Women’s struggle for suffrage, gender issues concerning citizenship and political representation (not to speak of gender-related issues in a broader sense) are entirely absent in the content of the anthology. As a product of parliament, the publication therefore differs considerably from previous publications that have celebrated women’s suffrage during its 50th, 75th and 80th anniversaries. Earlier publications initiated by parliament were almost entirely devoted to women and politics, political representation and the history of women’s emancipation.28 Only the prologue, written by the newly elected speaker Andreas Norlén (from the Conservative party Moderaterna), references the fact that women were enfranchised and eventually could be elected to parliament. The prologue describes the election of 1921 as the fulfilment of a “full democratic electoral process to parliament”.29 The speaker thereafter continues by naming the first five women elected to parliament. This section, half a page long, is all that is said on the matter throughout the entire publication.

Despite the invisibility of women’s suffrage in the anthology published by parliament and on its website, the inauguration of the jubilee for democracy did recognise and celebrate the significance of women’s suffrage.30 A visitor to the inauguration, without knowledge of the paucity of references to women’s suffrage and gender issues in the parliamentary anthology, could easily have been under the impression that the centennial of the women’s vote was in

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28 See Hamrin-Thorell/Lindström/Stenberg, Kvinnors röst och rätt, see note 14; Björkenhem/Hansing Engström/Wångnerud, Rätt att rösta 1919–1995, see note 14; Jönsson, Rösträtten 80 år, see note 14. Notable is that it is only the latter publication that celebrates 1921, the others focus on 1919.
29 Norlén, Förord [Prologue], in: Barrling/Holmberg eds., Demokratins framtid, see note 13, 7.
fact at the centre of festivities. On 17 December 2018, the jubilee’s grand and solemn inauguration took place in the parliamentary buildings, by special invitation only, alongside high security presence. The opening started early in the morning with the ceremonial raising of the flag in the presence of the King and the Crown Princess. A seminar on the anthology, “Rösträttens århundrade”, took place in the former hall of the second chamber. The royals attended the whole seminar, as did the speaker, the first deputy speaker, several former and present members of parliament, as well as those scholars contributing to the anthologies. At the opening, the speaker pointed out the seats of the four women elected to the second chamber in 1921, four seats scattered among a total amount of 233 seats. Before lunch the speaker opened a public exhibition on democracy and suffrage in an adjacent building. The opening consisted of a joint speech held by him and an expert on the history of women’s suffrage, Professor Christina Florin. Undoubtedly, during the whole morning, the history of the struggle for women’s suffrage had a prominent place. The afternoon was devoted to the anthology published by parliament.

All in all, the inauguration was grand and paid considerable attention to women’s suffrage. However, this is not reflected by the websites, the study material produced for schools or the anthology published by parliament. Therefore, what will remain in the archives is a rather concise narrative of something called a democratic breakthrough, a process in which women’s suffrage is portrayed as its point of culmination, even if not remaining at the centre of the commemoration. The tendency to symbolically acknowledge gender equality and women’s political citizenship during the jubilee by simultaneously pushing these matters into the periphery of public memory and avoiding its complex history, appears similar to ways of memory making elsewhere. According to historian Ann Ighe, the exhibition in the EU Parliament’s visitor centre and the House of European History in Brussels presents, on the one hand, gender equality as an integral part of a modern European identity, and, on the other hand, in a way that lacks attentiveness to the nuances and complexities of its history.31

4. Scholarly participation in memory work

As shown above, actions were taken simultaneously by scholars – not least gender researchers – and by parliament in order to prepare for commemorations of the upcoming jubilee. Many scholars have contributed with lectures and texts, as well as serving as experts for the

production of websites and other kinds of material for the jubilee, published by parliament, other memory sites such as “Demokrati100” [Democracy100] or by popular magazines such as “Historiskan” which published a special issue on women’s suffrage. Gender researchers started their network in 2015 and soon settled on 2021 as the factual centennial of women’s suffrage, while parliament decided to organise a jubilee that would last for more than three years. Even though much more remains to be organised within the timeline of the national jubilee, it is quite obvious that until the end of 2020 less emphasis has been placed on women’s suffrage and gender equality than on ‘the democratic breakthrough’.

What about the accounts advanced by gender researchers? The anthology “Rösträttens århundrade” is a joint publication that brings together established scholars: historians, political scientists and gender researchers, with the purpose of public outreach. Did gender researchers manage to provide a more complex and historically contextualised account of events by posing relevant critical questions that derive from the rigours of historically informed analysis, as Klas-Göran Karlsson has demanded? Did gender researchers relate the centennial to the specific challenges that arose after the vote was won, as well as to today’s threats to sexual and reproductive rights, gender-based violence, the still notable gender pay-gap, to the role the struggle for suffrage played in a wider context of feminism at the turn of the twentieth century etc.? Indeed, many have contributed to the destabilisation of the strong narrative about suffrage as a final goal for women’s emancipation, isolated from a larger context of feminism. Several chapters are, for example, devoted to problems concerning political representation after the vote was won. But hardly any contribution discusses the fight for suffrage in the wider context of early Swedish feminism. This is in the same vein as previous publications that have commemorated women’s suffrage in Sweden. Despite this, the anthology is important as a research-based addition to the official narrative about a democratic breakthrough. Without it, the celebrations would have been remarkably gender-free. During the celebrations organised by the parliamentary committee the centenary for women’s political suffrage has been placed in the shadow of a larger national memory of democracy. Notable is the fact that, up to spring 2020, neither the parliamentary website nor

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33 See Karlsson, Historiska jubileer, see note 8, 656.
34 See the earlier publications Hamrin-Thorell/Lindström/Stenberg eds., Kvinnors röst och rätt, see note 14; Björkenhem/Hansing Engström/Wängnerud eds., Rätt att rösta 1919–1995, see note 14, Jönsson, Rösträtten 80 år, see note 14.
the study material for schools did provide any information about the anthology on suffrage, which confirms this conclusion.

Hence, during the commemorations women’s votes have mainly functioned as a symbol for the fulfilment of a parliamentary democracy. Thus far, the memory produced by parliament has not to any large extent discussed or reflected on this reform in problematising ways, relating it to the wider feminist struggle for women’s rights or relating it to today’s gender-related problems. Nor has parliament succeeded in thoroughly including the history of gender and women’s rights in their production of information and study materials. This is not least reflected in the anthology about the future for democracy (“Demokratins framtid”).

How can scholarly participation in this kind of memory work be understood? To what extent are researchers complicit in national memory production? Once again, it is worth repeating that more events will take place, and, as such, participation in parliamentary memory work so far will not constitute the full picture. Forthcoming larger events organised by gender researchers include the aforementioned conference “Suffrage Now!”, which will take place in August 2021. Also, in August 2021, the “XIII Nordic Women’s and Gender History Conference” will be held. In their call for papers, the organisers make plain the themes of power and disempowerment in the context of the Swedish centennial. Furthermore, because of the centennial, the Swedish academic history journal “Historisk tidskrift” [Historical Journal] is planning a special issue on ‘women’ as a historical category.

So far, contributions made by gender researchers in publications such as “Rösträttens århundrade”, texts on the website “Demokrati100” and in popular magazines, etc., about women’s suffrage and the early women’s movement are plentiful. Nevertheless, suffrage is rarely contextualised within the broader struggle for women’s rights and emancipation, and hardly ever presented as part of a much larger and heterogeneous women’s movement. Strangely enough, the fight for suffrage is quite often presented as a separate struggle, as a movement of its own. Significant for the historiography of Swedish early feminism is that suffrage is turned into a milestone of the women’s movement regardless of other early claims.

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35 See XIII Nordic Women’s and Gender History Conference, at: https://events.au.dk/nwghc21; access: March 8, 2020.
and different feminist visions.\textsuperscript{37} This is remarkable, not least since another crucial reform concerning women and citizenship was passed during the very same year that women gained the right to vote. Until 1921, married women were still under the guardianship of their husbands. The struggle to change this had been ongoing since the mid-nineteenth century. Regardless of the profound change for individual women once the law was finally adopted, the principal focus in Swedish historiography surrounding women’s rights and feminism has been on the vote as the hardest struggle to win, signifying a milestone in a history propelled by progress.\textsuperscript{38}

Furthermore, women’s right to vote is often described as something that is first and foremost related to the state: women demand a relationship with the state as separate individuals and citizens. Formally, this is what the claim was about. But it was also, and perhaps more importantly, much more with respect to women’s rights in general, touching on themes of emancipation, liberty, bodily integrity, sexuality, power and peace.\textsuperscript{39} Ideas and visions differed widely in the women’s movement up until the vote, something rarely shown in today’s historiography of women’s suffrage. In short, the memory produced so far gives someone without extensive knowledge about the early women’s movement the impression that suffrage was seen as the ultimate goal and that the women’s movement was simply a suffrage movement. Disagreements, disappointments, as well as different feminist visions, tend to be obscured in the reproduction of such a narrative.\textsuperscript{40} The anthology “Rösträttens århundrade” is no exception.

\textsuperscript{37} See Manns, Minnet av kvinnor rösträtt, see note 7. See also Bolette Frydendahl Larsen, At fejre historien: Refleksioner efter stemmeretsjubilæet i Danmark [To celebrate history. Reflections after the Danish suffrage jubilee], in: Gränslos: Tidskrift för studier av Öresundsregionens historia, kultur och samhällsliv [Without borders. Journal of the study of the history, culture and society of the Öresund Region], 6 (2016), 12–22; Jytte Larsen, Heltind og antihelte: Kvindevalgetskampens historiografi [Heroines and anti-heroes. The historiography of the struggle for women’s suffrage], in: Karen Lützen and Annette K. Nielsen eds., På kant med historien: Studier i køn, videnskab og lidenskab tilegnet Bente Rosenbeck på hendes 60-årsdag [At odds with history. Studies on gender, knowledge and passion dedicated to Bente Rosenbeck on her 60th birthday], København 2008, 307–327.

\textsuperscript{38} See Manns, Minnet av kvinnor rösträtt, see note 7. This is not only significant for Sweden. As discussed by Lisa Tetrault, studies on the early women’s movement tend to closely follow in the trajectory produced by the early feminists themselves, see Lisa Tetrault, The Myth of Seneca Falls. Memory and the Suffrage Movement, 1848–1898, Chapel Hill, NC 2014, 198–199. See also Hemmings, Why Stories Matter, see note 8.


\textsuperscript{40} See Manns, Minnet av kvinnor rösträtt, see note 7.
5. Counter-memory work

As stressed by Klas-Göran Karlsson, historical jubilees are by necessity both historico-political and historico-cultural events.\textsuperscript{41} They are mediated and materialised, and thus generate plenty of memory products for the archives and therefore for the future.\textsuperscript{42} As shown in this study, memory politics of the Swedish parliament is dominated by a politically informed need to tell a story of progress and manifest a democratic breakthrough with the fulfilment of universal and equal suffrage for women and men. This is a narrative according to which gender relations and women’s struggle for justice, independence and freedom hold a symbolically important yet peripheral place. In this context, the special issue on the remaining suffrage restrictions published in “Arbetarhistoria” in 2019 appears as a piece of counter-memory. The special issue serves to destabilise the official narrative, doing so by publishing ongoing research about the suffrage restrictions that remained in place after 1921. If the parliamentary commemorations are preoccupied with reasserting the core values of democracy in a Sweden that, just as in 1918, is shaken by social anxiety and increasing economic differences, the counter-memory produced in the journal “Labour History” reminds us how democracy is far from complete. Suffrage restrictions remained in place until 1989 and ongoing research points to the fact that some even remain.\textsuperscript{43}

By the end of 2020, the question of whether gender researchers have succeeded in contributing to a more accurate and complex picture of women’s emancipation, citizenship and social justice during the celebrations cannot be fully answered. So far, the jubilee is dominated by a general narrative of a democratic breakthrough, in which the meaning of political citizenship for women and the current state of gender equality is by no means addressed in depth. Similar to memory making of a common European identity, on the EU level, the Swedish parliament acknowledges the importance and necessity of gender equality and women’s political citizenship but shows little interest in presenting its history in a more complex way, a way that could possibly encourage further interest for safeguarding democratic core values. Ongoing research about suffrage restrictions and feminist historiography will probably and hopefully add to an increased awareness about the

\textsuperscript{41} See Karlsson, Introduktion, see note 8.
\textsuperscript{42} See Erll, Memory, see note 4.
\textsuperscript{43} See note 2.
vulnerability of today’s democracy. Whether this knowledge will make its way into public and national memory making is yet to be seen.