

The Use of History for Facilitating or for Disrupting Mutual Understanding between Groups

Erik Sandewall

Almost all countries exhibit a significant cultural diversity, and this applies regardless of their system of governance and their level of economic development. Distrust and enmity between cultural groups within one country is a significant risk, therefore, and in some cases it is a major problem for the country at hand. It has been proposed by some that this issue should be met by turning a blind eye to the existence of groups, and that the habit of distinguishing between "us" and "them" is at the root of the problem. This is not a viable solution, however, and the solution must be instead to get people to adopt positive attitudes towards their "them" groups, in the sense of groups that they do not identify with themselves.

One viable approach for fostering positive attitudes between groups is to have an open discussion about their similarities and their differences, both in the world of today and in the past. Such a discussion may make it possible for each group to learn about the other group as well as to explain the background and rationale for its own values and its beliefs.

However, there is also a danger if such an exposition only emphasizes the differences between the groups, and if the presentation describes one group in a very positive way and the other group in a very negative way. Doing so will certainly contribute to negative attitudes and to increasing dissent.

In this article, I shall discuss one specific case where this phenomenon can be observed in some detail, namely, the essay "Muhammad, the Liberator of Women" [1] which was authored by Mirza Mahmud Ahmad in 1928. It is of interest because of its longevity and the impact of its theses; many of its claims can be found in other publications as well. Ahmad's article appeared first in Urdu language, and then in an English translation in 2015, and also in a number of other languages, including a Swedish translation, also in 2015.

The major theses of Ahmad's text are that before the arrival of Muhammad, women in all countries were in the same position as slaves; that Muhammad changed this by proclaiming in the name of God that men and women were equal and should have equal rights; and that the rest of the world (outside Islam) would not accept this insight until during the last (20th) century.

In a recent article [2] I have proposed that Ahmad's text is deeply flawed, and I have given examples from Swedish and Scandinavian history that contradict

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his claims about 'all countries'. Kashif Virk has answered with a rebuttal that is available as [3]. The present article shall substantiate the claims in my previous article further, but I also want to describe how the comparison between early Swedish and early Muslim history may instead be approached constructively, and in a positive vein.

Brief Rebuttals of Kashif Virk's Objections

First of all, come comments on Kashif Virk's objections. The first one concerns my observation that women had a strong standing in Egypt during Pharaonic times, more than 1000 years before Muhammad. He states that although women were better treated than elsewhere, they were not equal to men in social respects. So much is clear, but Ahmad is still wrong when he claims that women everywhere were treated as slaves, and in his specific description of their condition.

The second objection concerns whether Ahmad claims that the changes in women's conditions in the rest of the world were due to influences from Islam. Virk states that Ahmad does not make that claim, but in fact he writes: *Those same people ... began to obey the injunctions of the Holy Prophet...* which certainly sounds like an influence.

The third objection concerns the laws for divorce, and it will be considered next.

An Example of Misleading Explanations

Historical developments tend to be complicated matter which makes it difficult to reduce them to simple descriptions and clear sequences of causes and effects. They therefore lend themselves to accounts that are misleading, sometimes intentionally and sometimes by oversight. Both Ahmad's essay and our discussion about it contain several examples of this problem.

For example, Ahmad states that in 1920 Sweden enacted a law that made divorces legal. This is a peculiar statement since the lawbook of 1736 contained specific rules in this respect.

Kashif Virk has objected by referring to a document that was issued by the RFSU organization [4] describing the chronology of women's liberation in Sweden from 1736 and onwards. According to this chronology, it was in 1915 that "women obtained the right to obtain a divorce".

A more nuanced account can be obtained in [5] which is published by the Bonnier Publications company. It describes how information about marital separation can be found in the archives of the Church from the sixteenth century and onwards, and as well in the archives of the courts since 1736. Divorce would be immediate in some situations, such as after marital infidelity, or if one of the

spouses had been absent and unreachable for a sufficiently long time. It also specified rules for handling grave dissent between the spouses, in which case there would be an attempt of mediation. If this failed then a court could decide on separation for a period of time. The recognized reasons for a divorce were extended in several steps, especially in 1810 and 1860, and the formal procedure for obtaining it was simplified as well. The natural next step was taken in 1915 with a new law whereby there was no longer a requirement to state the reasons for the divorce; it was sufficient that at least one of the spouses requested it.

Historical developments do not always proceed in a single direction. Swedish laws during the early Christian period were quite restrictive with respect to divorce, and the restrictions were reduced gradually over the centuries. On the other hand, reference [6] relates how divorce was a real option for Scandinavian women during the Viking age, before the region was christianized.

The historical references in Ahmad's essay, in the RSFU leaflet, and in Virk's debate paper are misleading in a number of ways. They pretend that women could not have a divorce at any time before 1915, or 1920 according to Ahmad. They describe this liberation as part of the development for women, whereas in fact all the legal rules described above applied equally for men and women (except for the rule about the loss of the dowry in some situations). This example shows that even a seemingly clear-cut question, like "since when have women been able to request a divorce?" can not easily be reduced to a simple answer, and attempts to do so run a big risk of being quite misleading.

Understanding the Social Context of Early Swedish Laws

Ahmad's account of the rights of women in pre-Islamic society versus Islamic society addresses two major issues: property rights and marital rights. Both of these must be seen in the context of the social structure that prevailed at the time. Both of them also affect the autonomy and the respect that women could enjoy, and these are important aspects of what we perceive as 'freedom' and 'liberation'.

In order to properly understand the laws that have been mentioned here, one must therefore be aware of their social context, with respect to property rights and marital rights in particular. In the case of the early Swedish laws that are being considered here, they were designed for use in a rural society where the farm and its household was the basic unit, headed by a *bonde* (house-master) and his *husfru* (house-mistress, ie the wife of the house-master). The household would usually include a number of other persons of different ages: not only children and grandparents, but also farmhands and kitchen-aids.

The ownership of real estate and other property was of central importance for the household in this sense. The housemaster and housemistress had their individual properties which they had obtained by inheritance or as a loan of expected

inheritance. In addition, there was the property of the household itself (*boet*) where the housemistress owned one-third, and the housemaster owned two-thirds. This common property included money that had been obtained by the sale of produce from the farm, for example.

The separate identity of the properties of the housemaster and the housemistress was important in some situations, and in particular when one of them died, because then the widow or widower were still in control of their own property and their share of the 'boet'. The other parts had to be given to the rightful heirs, or kept in custody for them if they were not yet in a position to receive it.

In modern terms, this household could be seen as a small corporation with a majority owner and a minority owner, as well as dependents and employees. The housemaster can be seen as the director, with the housemistress as his deputy. The former was in charge of business transactions, both for his own account, for his wife's account, and for *boet*, but transactions for his wife's account were only allowed if she had agreed to them with her free will. The housemistress had a right to buy and sell as well, but she ought to have the housemaster's approval in advance, otherwise he had the right to invalidate the transaction¹

Other members of the household were not allowed to participate in business transactions, and it was against the law, and punishable, to buy anything from any of them, regardless of gender. (Except that their purchases at the marketplace were permitted.) This means that the substantial difference between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' was not between men and women, but between the housemaster and housemistress on one hand, and their subordinates in the household. Moreover, if the housemaster died then his widow took over his duties and powers more or less entirely.

The role of the housemistress was expressed during the wedding ceremony by a statement that she was wed "to lock and key", which meant that she was in charge of protecting and releasing the resources of the household. These resources included the annual harvest which had to be stored for the winter and used wisely so that it would last until the next harvest; they also included the household's valuables. In other words, hers was a duty with considerable importance and status.

The right to select one's spouse without constraints may be seen as a natural aspect of freedom. This freedom is taken for granted today, as a matter of principle, but it was not so in old times because of the importance of the extended family, or the clan, whereby a marriage was often seen as an liaison between two families. This meant that men as well as women were influenced by the wishes of their parents and other kin. However, there must also have been cases where a young couple decided to marry without the consent of their families. The law

¹According to the common rural law of around 1350.

stated one restriction in this respect: if a maiden marries without the permission of her guardian (usually, her father, otherwise, her mother) then she will lose her inheritance rights unless the guardian 'forgives' her for this deed. The law did not specify any similar rule for bachelors. This seems to mean that if her parents did not own any substantial property (which may have been the case for a majority of people) then a young woman was not subject to any formal effects if she married without parental approval. The social constraints must have been more important, but they were present for men and women alike.

Comparing Cultural Histories in a Positive Vein

Ahmad's essay can not contribute to mutual understanding between cultural groups; in view of its grave errors [7] it tends to have the opposite effect. In particular, he purports to describe the situation of women 'in all countries' before the advent of Muhammad, as well as after his arrival. Large parts of the text are absolutely incorrect with respect to the historical situation of women in Sweden, and other parts are grossly misleading although they may contain some partial truth. He also fails to recognize the strong situation of women in Egypt during pharaonic times, regardless of their social and economic status.

However, it would certainly be quite possible to prepare a short article that compares, in an objective fashion, the development of women's rights in Sweden (or Scandinavia) with the corresponding development in the original Muslim region. These developments have important points in common since family structures and clan structures dominated, apparently, in both these regions in their early days. The effects of introducing a new creed are also significant in both cases. The rules of society have likewise evolved over time, for a variety of reasons including the shift from an agrarian society to an industrialized one. If a comparison of these developments is written with a positive attitude then it would highlight similarities as well as differences, and it could explain the reasons for the change of attitudes or the absence of such change, at various points in time.

Such an approach also has a bearing on the Swedish policies for government support of minority groups, where the main idea is that the inherent character of each cultural group shall be encouraged and supported. The organizations that receive such support make statements that they wish to build bridges between their own group and the majority society, but it is not clear how much is done in that respect. One part of bridge-building should be to explain Swedish culture to the immigrant group, with Swedish history being one aspect of the culture, but such activities are notably absent, even in organizations such as Ibn Rushd [8]. The preparation of a text that compares our histories in a constructive way could be a concrete step that would be in line with the official policy.

Finally, with respect to the approach that Ahmad takes in his essay: Muham-

mad has made an important contribution to mankind and to civilization, and there is no need to promote him using misleading accounts or caricatures of other branches of human culture. Open-mindedness and balanced views are in everyone's interests.

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