“Branding Bildung”: Commodifying the Uniqueness of Popular Education

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Abstract
Popular education has a long history in Sweden, dating back to the mid-1800s and having developed in close relationship with the state. This relationship has been sustained over the years by the way popular education is spoken of as being “unique”—as being complementary to formal education. In this article, we focus on how the uniqueness of popular education is shaped today, and how it operates to legitimize further support. We draw on Barthes’ notion of myth, analyzing interviews with managers, principals, study circle leaders and teachers working with adult asylum seekers and refugees at study associations and folk high schools. We argue that the myth of the uniqueness of popular education is made up of three rhetorical figures that are mobilized by a range of actors legitimizing state support for popular education. The myth thus becomes a “tool” that commodifies popular education, that is, that turns the myth into monetary funds.

Keywords
popular education, bildung, Ronald Barthes, myth, commodification

Introduction

The participants return to us [when they start to take part in Swedish for immigrants—Sfi] and tell us “We learn more here with you.”

—Manager at ABF.

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We are more available [compared with Sfi teachers]. At Sfi you only get a book and are told to work by yourself. In my experience, you don’t know what to do with a book in Swedish if you come from Africa.

—Study circle leader at ABF.

These are just two of many statements made by managers and study circle leaders at one of the study associations in Sweden, which provides study circles for newly arrived asylum seekers introducing the Swedish language and Swedish society. The statements give an insight into a common way in which representatives from popular education institutions, such as study associations and folk high schools, often describe themselves: as something different, and often better than the formal education system. Such descriptions shape one’s identity in relation to others, by defining what one is not. Notably, Hayden White (1972, p. 5) describes identity construction as a form of “ostensive self-definition by negation,” establishing a border between the self and the other by articulating who we are not; the other provides the mirror in which we perceive ourselves. Definitions of popular education—moving from individuals to institutions—operate in a similar fashion, describing popular education as different, as something else in comparison with the formal educational system. These statements connect themselves with a long-standing discourse on the “uniqueness of popular education” in a Swedish context.

This uniqueness is often described as containing—compared with the regular education system—a different view on learning (bildung), a different pedagogy, a stronger focus on democracy and culture, and so on, which is argued to connect with a specific popular educational history and tradition. Such a uniqueness has been supported and legitimized not only by practitioners and policy makers but also by researchers. Some research has argued more strongly for and/or reinforced the idea of a uniqueness of popular education in terms of democracy (Niklasson, 2007; Sundgren, 1980), culture (Hartman, 1993), bildning (Gustavsson, 1996), and pedagogy (Arvidson, 1988; Paldanius, 2014). There are also scholars who more directly problematize whether there is actually a uniqueness to popular education. Sundgren (2003), for example, asks whether there is any evidence that there is an essence to the uniqueness of popular education. His answer is no. However, this uniqueness, he argues, could, rather than being seen in terms of essence, be seen in the plurality in the organizations, ideologies, and practices that make up popular education. Paldanius (2014) is also hesitant about giving any definite answer to the question of uniqueness. Instead, he argues that one could empirically focus on what does seem unique in specific settings. Another way to assess uniqueness would, he argues, be to turn to the relationship between reader and text. If a reader of a text that elaborates on the uniqueness of, for example, folk high schools and their organization and practice finds them to be different compared with his or her own experiences of education, one might say that uniqueness has been identified.

If we relate the Swedish case to the wider literature, the notion of popular education is not singular. However, some common denominators have been identified, such as
the political dimension of popular education (social change), dialogue across knowledge domains as well as between people, and the idea that people engaged in popular education should be people of change (Kane, 2013). Popular education is often also construed as being “against the state”—as activities for the broader masses who are not part of the elite, and thus, popular education is shaped as unique, or at least different as compared with State organized education (see, e.g., Flowers, 2009).

In sum, the discourse on the uniqueness of popular education in Sweden has been supported and reinforced, as well as questioned, by researchers. We tend to agree with those who argue that the presence of a uniqueness is an empirical question, and this is something that we take into consideration in this article. More precisely, in this article, we focus on how the uniqueness of popular education is shaped today, and how it operates in order to legitimize further support. By doing so, our ambition is to contribute to the understanding of what role such a discourse plays in contemporary times.

**Popular Education in Sweden**

In Sweden, popular education has a long tradition dating back to the 1800s with the establishment of the first folk high schools in 1868, in combination with the emergence of public libraries and public lectures. The first study association that is still active today was created in 1912 (Gustavsson, 2013) alongside social movements such as the workers’ movement, the temperance movement and the free church movement. The folk high schools were turned into schools for the members of these movements, many of whom were working class. Originally, folk high schools were for the sons of rich farmers, but in the 1930s the majority of students came from the working class. These schools then came to serve as the only possibility for the further education of the working class at that time (Larsson, 2013).

Folk high schools and study associations are part of what in Swedish is called *folkbildning*. There is no equivalent word in English, but it could be translated as “popular education.” However, popular education in Sweden is quite different compared with that in other parts of the world. Popular education is a part of the corporatist Swedish welfare model (Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson, et al., 2018; Trägårdh, 2007) characterized by a close relationship between the state and civil society organizations. The state has provided popular education with financial support for the past century, and this is still the case today. Today, approximately 4 billion Swedish kronor (400 million Euro) from the state budget is directed to folk high schools and study associations, with the broad aim that this should support the further development of democracy and culture, and lessen the education gap among the population. However, besides the general state support for popular education, the state and other public actors also task popular education institutions with specific commissions, which generates extra income for these institutions. Two such commissions emerged in the wake of the recent refugee situation, namely “Swedish from Day 1” and “Language introduction” (see, e.g., Fejes & Dahlstedt, 2017; Fejes, Aman, et al., 2018; Fejes, Dahlstedt, Mesic, et al., 2018), which are the empirical contexts of this article.
What characterizes Swedish popular education is first and foremost that it is free and voluntary. The concept of being free and voluntary can be seen in various ways. First, that study associations and folk high schools are free to design any programs and courses they wish, and students are free to register for these. They are as institutions free from the State—that is, they are part of civil society, and thus they constantly need to legitimize their activities in order to secure State funding. Second, that popular education can foremost be categorized as nonformal education as no grades are awarded. It is only for those folk high school courses that provide eligibility to apply for higher education that documentation resembling grades is issued. Third, that the idea of *bildning* (*bildung* in German) as the foundation of popular education emphasizes the free search for knowledge, since involvement in study circles or folk high school courses should be based on participants’ own will and motivation.

There have been ongoing discussions on what characterizes the pedagogy of popular education. For folk high schools, the pedagogy has been argued to be based on the collective as a basis for the individual’s development, both relational and self-driven (Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson, et al., 2018; Paldanius, 2014). Study circles were originally seen as being based on the participants’ own activities and experiences. These experiences were the starting point for discussions in combination with literature. The study circle leader did not have the role of a teacher, but was rather included as a member of the group. These notions of experience, the books and the leader, were the basis for the idea of collective learning among the participants, that is, free and voluntary self-*bildung* (Gustavsson, 2013).

**Research Approach and Methods**

To analyze how the uniqueness of popular education is shaped today, and how it operates, we make use of Roland Barthes’ concept of “myth” from his eclectic collection of essays titled *Mythologies*. Although education may seem a far cry from Barthes’ insightful analyses of French postwar consumer culture—from Citroën’s spiritual imagery and the spectacle of wrestling to in-depth comparisons between soap powders and detergents—several educational scholars have made fruitful use of his work to study myth as a rhetorical phenomenon in critiquing ideologies (e.g., Bass & Cherwitz, 1978; Dorsey, 1997). In these studies, similar to Barthes’ own interpretation, myth is defined as a master story, a grand narrative, which describes virtuous people doing extraordinary things that serve as moral guides for proper action (Burnett et al., 2003; Hart, 1990). This is also the reason why Barthes (1993a, p. 118) refers to a myth as “stolen language,” by which he implies that myth robs language of its primary meaning in order for the text to come across as something naturalized and depolitical. Defined in this way, a myth “hides nothing and flaunts nothing, it distorts; myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion,” writes Barthes (1993a, p. 129). This depolitical inflexion also serves the purpose of binding people together, not necessarily through a set of immutable truths, but through references to historical and political events, and appeals to a material orientation (Bass & Cherwitz, 1978). Similar to the way in which previous studies have uncovered that myth is significant in the
reinforcement of a national values (e.g., Dorsey, 1997), Barthes (1993b) asserts that myth does not deny a chain of events or the existence of certain common traits. On the contrary, its function is to talk about them, to make them visible. In making a myth innocent, to purify its content, it is given a natural and eternal justification. Myth is not an explanation, Barthes affirms, but a statement of a fact. In this article, we will argue that the uniqueness of popular education becomes shaped as myth, as something exceptional, which in turn is commodified and turned into monetary funds.

**Method and Data Collection**

This article draws on empirical material from studies conducted at two folk high schools and five locations with study associations. These sites and schools were situated in five different locations across Sweden, ranging from rural towns to cities. The data collection was conducted by five researchers during 2017 and 2018, at programs and study circles where adult migrants learnt about the Swedish language and Swedish society. The two folk high schools programs were called language introduction, and the study circle was called Swedish from Day 1. The sites for the study were selected based on (1) an interest in studying popular education work with asylum seekers and refugees, (2) gaining an insight into the two main popular education institutions in Sweden, and (3) the size of the schools. Thus, we selected two folk high schools located in mid-sized cities for further studies, as well as one study association and its work at five sites across three locations (one rural town, one mid-sized city, and one large city).

Inspired by field research (see, e.g., Davis, 2008), researchers were on site observing what was happening in the programs and study circles. Informal conversations were conducted with teachers, study circle leaders and participants. Based on this data collection, interview guides were constructed as a basis for semistructured interviews with managers, principals, teachers, and study circle leaders. The interview guide comprised questions concerning the organization of the teaching in the classroom, its content, relationships with the participants, how these popular education initiatives could support newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees inclusion in Swedish society, and their relationships to other educational providers. In all, we conducted interviews with five principals, nine managers, 22 folk high school teachers and 8 study circles leaders. The interviews lasted between 40 and 120 minutes, and were all transcribed verbatim. However, some quotations have been edited for readability.

In accordance with ethical research practices, all participants provided their consent to participate after they had been informed of the aim of the study and how the research material would be used. All personal data and the names of schools, municipalities, and cities have been anonymized. The research project has been granted ethical approval by the regional ethical board at Linköping University (Dnr 2017/280-31).

In order to identify how the uniqueness of popular education is shaped today, and how it operates in order to legitimize further support, we draw on the concept of myth, that is, how it is shaped through the way different actors speak about popular education. When reading our interview transcripts, we first focused on identifying different statements about popular education being unique. Those statements that were deemed
to be closely related were then grouped together into themes (see, e.g., Braun & Clarke, 2006). Such themes have in turn been construed as rhetorical figures, and are presented as such. Three rhetorical figures that together constitute the myth of the uniqueness of popular education have been identified.

Results

In the first part of the analysis, we focus on how the myth of the uniqueness of popular education is shaped through rhetorical figures. The second part of the analysis directs attention to how this myth serves as a basis for legitimizing and commodifying popular education.

The Myth of Popular Education

The myth of the uniqueness of popular education emerges through the ways in which popular education is described by those who work in study associations and folk high schools. Three main rhetorical figures used in the shaping of the myth have been identified: “the historical legacy,” popular education as “free and voluntary,” and the “unique pedagogical approach.”

The Historical Legacy. The historical legacy as a rhetorical figure emerges as an important part of how the myth of the uniqueness of popular education is shaped in our material. This is not surprising, given that popular education has a long history that emerges closely alongside the workers’ movement, the temperance movement and the free church movement (Eriksson, 2002). Thus, there are a range of ideological foundations on which study associations and folk high school base their activities. In our analysis, history is mainly used to legitimize and support the notion that popular education is particularly suited to meeting the needs of a diverse range of people, not least those in the greatest need. This is highly visible in our empirical material where, for example, a principal from a folk high school owned by the workers’ movement states as follows:

We have many general courses, which we have had for a long time [compared to other folk high schools, where a higher proportion of the courses on offer are specialist courses], and this relates to us being a folk high school connected to a people’s movement—we have our roots in the workers’ movement. Originally, it was the farmers’ children and workers who entered the folk high schools in order to access education, so we are used to being a school for everyone. It might sound a bit pompous, but I believe I have good reason to put it that way. (Principal at FHS)

Here, the principal refers back to the history of folk high schools, and especially those emerging with the aim of catering for workers’ opportunities to access education. The logic that emerges here is that, with such a history, the folk high schools have become places that can cater for students with diverse backgrounds and needs. A similar
connection to the history of popular education, and more specifically to the workers’ movement, is made by one of the managers at ABF:

Our mission is the same today, but the target groups are different compared to a 100 years ago. That’s why it has felt like a calling to be part of this [Swedish from Day 1]. It’s extremely important that ABF engages in this and supports these people. (Manager at ABF)

ABF is an organization with a history of supporting people in need, even though the definition of who is in need changes over time. Here, historical roots are mobilized as a way to build the myth of the uniqueness of popular education while also bringing people together. According to the manager, being part of popular education is not merely a vocation. Rather, the involvement in “Swedish from Day 1” is spoken of as a calling (see, e.g., Fejes & Nicoll, 2010)—a calling to do good in line with what is construed as the history and uniqueness of, in this case, ABF. Similar ways to connect back to the history of popular education are mentioned by another ABF manager.

This [Swedish from Day 1] is something that has to be done. It’s popular education, as it was from the beginning. There is a need, there was a need for knowledge, bildung and education. And we are well suited to organizing it. (Manager at ABF)

In this statement, popular education is shaped as something that can provide bildung, knowledge, for the people in need of such knowledge. The two managers from ABF quoted above thus reconstructs history in the present where the task to provide knowledge to newly arrived asylum seekers and refugees are compared with the task that lay the foundation for the creation of ABF in the early 1900s—to provide knowledge to the working class men and women who had not had a chance for any further formal education (see, e.g., Larsson, 2013). This way of reasoning is not limited to this study alone, but has emerged with particular salience in previous research on popular education where links are drawn between the past and the present, with the only difference being that a new group slips into the position of those in a marginalized position (Aman & Lundberg, 2013; Eriksson, 2002).

Previous studies have shown that this language is picked up by its recipients where, for example, representatives of the Muslim folk high school in Stockholm describe themselves as “the new farmers.” Such a statement refers to their position in both contemporary society and the history of popular education (Aman et al., 2011). Linking back to Barthes (1993b), the recurrent references to popular education in the service of farmers fulfil a particular rhetorical purpose. Although, at least for the first few decades of the existence of folk high schools (the latter part of the 1800s), the target group was the sons of wealthy landowners rather than those in need (Larsson, 2013). What this shows is that historical accuracy is not necessarily a virtue in itself. Rather, it shows that memory must be voided of all forms of diverse and contradictory stories and events to serve the purpose of presenting the alleged uniqueness of popular education.
Such a statement about the role of popular education in Swedish history, to again borrow from Barthes (1993a), reveals the intention of myth: it freezes, purifies and internalizes by dissolving contradictory messages. The message can never be ambiguous; the concept (the uniqueness of popular education) is specifically meant to be appropriated by the recipient of the myth. Thus, one fundamental feature of the mythical concept is that it is appropriated. Barthes (1993b) employs this notion when analyzing the language of advertising. Similar to the ways in which ideological domains are naturalized through a multitude of denotative messages, the conception of popular education as a particular kind of educational form—unique, egalitarian, voluntarily—will therefore be present in all sorts of signifiers. Academic commentators have noted that the uniqueness of popular education is ever present in magazines, course catalogues, and advertising material (e.g., Andersén et al., 2003; Jonsson, 2003; Rosén, 1984). We have ourselves, in another study in which participants at folk high schools were interviewed, noted how the discourse on the uniqueness of popular education was appropriated and reproduced by participants themselves (see Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson, et al., 2018). The history of popular education—and, to some extent, the workers’ movement—is drawn on in interviews as a way to shape the myth of popular education as something specific and spectacular. Such a myth is further reinforced by the way the organization of today’s popular education is spoken about.

**Popular Education as Free and Voluntary.** A recurrent rhetorical figure in the way the myth of the uniqueness of popular education emerges in our empirical material is how it is spoken about as “free and voluntary.” This figure has a long history, and has been so strong that it is also codified in the law regulating state funding for popular education (Ministry of Education, 2015). The figure emerges across our empirical material, often as a way to legitimize and support the activities conducted. For example, as expressed by one of the principals at a folk high school:

> I don’t want to discard the compulsory and upper secondary school system. But it’s another approach. I believe that the way we invite, we have no predefined course plans. Participants can influence the course plans, and I believe this is important. (Principal at FHS)

The principal uses a negation, that is, comparing folk high schools with the formal education system, in order to build the myth of the uniqueness of popular education. By not having any state-regulated curriculum, folk high schools emerge as something positive and unique. A similar use of negation to build the myth of the uniqueness of popular education comes to the fore in this interview with one of the managers at ABF:

> Through the regulations, we can start and stop anytime. We do not need any fancy rooms. ABF is big. We have activities in nearly all municipalities [there are a total of 290 municipalities in Sweden], and also in several locations in some municipalities. Thus, we become flexible. In relation to this target group—refugees, people who do not know if they will be allowed to stay in Sweden or not—it’s not the right thing to engage them in
formal education. The municipalities have different regulations concerning teaching rooms, for employing people and such things. We can employ people by the hour. We can have interns. We can just pick people. We can make things happen much faster, more easily. Despite this, I do not think that we are worse [compared with the formal education system]. (Manager at ABF)

In this quotation, the flexibility of study associations, and the freedom to organize themselves however they want, is used as an argument for why they are specifically competent to organize activities for people in need, in this case refugees. Without a fixed curriculum, popular education can tailor activities to suit any individual. At least, this is the case according to another manager, who again contrasts this organizational and pedagogical liberty against other school forms—and, implicitly, rivals for recruiting pupils:

We are not right or wrong at ABF. We work the way we believe works. But in the other organizations [formal education], they have to work the way they have planned, and that’s like going from page 1 to page 300. (Manager at ABF)

Here, not only does the manager describe what is specific about popular education, but such a description is more explicitly related to constructions of how “others” are doing it. The symbol in play is an association with a textbook, where compulsory school—as a way to illustrate its stiffness, inflexibility and formalism—is unable to move in any other direction than from one page to the next. In the construction of identity, it is particularly relevant here that the principal defines popular education and its uniqueness by attempting to pin down what it actually is, but does so by contrasting it to what it is not. Following this logic, popular education is an educational form that is unlike those that are not. It is unimportant to the analysis pursued whether there are legitimate claims underpinning such an argument; yet the “flexibility” and the “voluntarily” become self-descriptive labels, signs of identification, that distinguish popular education from formal educational by pointing out its uniqueness.

**The Pedagogical Approach.** A third recurrent rhetorical figure building the myth of the uniqueness of popular education is the unique pedagogical approach of popular education. Such an approach is mainly described as collective, or rather as a way of organizing learning where the individual learns through and with the collective. As one of the principals at the folk high schools explains,

So, if you wish to become part of a social community, and learn study techniques, subject knowledge, then folk high schools might be better for you compared to municipal adult education,¹ which is much more individualized. But it depends on where you are in the process. Nevertheless, I get the impression that many of our participants feel that they are in a safe environment where they make new friends. This does not mean, however, that we should be some cosy place without a focus on knowledge. But a good safe environment is important in order to develop knowledge. (Principal at FHS)
Here, the folk high school is described as a place and a pedagogical practice where participants make new friends, gain a sense of belonging and feel safe. Such a feeling emerges here as a prerequisite for learning and something the teachers draw on in the classroom. Similar ways of describing the pedagogical approach emerge in interviews with a circle leader at ABF. One of the study circle leaders compares popular education with the formal education system: “It’s more collective here” (Circle leader at ABF). Such statements are far from uncommon in the interviews. After all, a recurrent trope surrounding popular education is that it is a collective process in which the individual can prosper (see, e.g., Laginder et al., 2013).

Regardless of the participants’ desires, interests, and backgrounds, the pedagogical approach of popular education is said to resonate with everyone. “Maybe they feel more like a human here,” another circle leader explains, “They are seen here. They get a sense of being part of a family here, maybe it’s the language, the participants or the circle leaders. So it’s a package” (Circle leader at ABF). What is unique about popular education, according to the circle leader, is the pedagogical approach which is part of a larger package that instils a sense of belonging among the participants. To be involved in popular education, the circle leader contends, means to feel more human, almost like being a family member. Seen as a myth, this way of reasoning is part of the way in which a myth, according to Barthes (1993b), acts economically by sidestepping all complexities of human and intercultural contacts (Aman, 2016). Human acts are given the simplicity of essence, doing away with all dialectics in narrating a totalizing history that combines the simultaneous success of both the individual and the collective, organizing a world without contradictions. Such a picture is compared with the formal adult education system, which can also be seen in an interview with another teacher:

So, the creative process, working with both body and mind—working with the entire person, so to speak. Organizing an alternative classroom rather than reinventing the wheel. In contrast to regular schools, where things were a little extravagant. But here [at the folk high school] things are more comme il faut. That’s the way you work, and this is new to me. Something I didn’t know about folk high schools before. (Teacher at FHS)

Again, the pedagogy of popular education is described in terms of uniqueness by its ability, as described by the teacher, to consider both mind and body, to focus on the entire person. To add heft to such a holistic view of popular education, regular schools are employed as a contrasting object. With experience from both systems, the teacher underlines that folk high schools are something different; they have a certain form of uniqueness that stands apart from other educational forms. This way of speaking about popular education, albeit not necessarily part of the teachers’ and study circle leaders’ agenda, has proven to be a valuable currency in an educational market where various schools compete for pupils and, by extension, funding (cf. Lundahl et al., 2013). In short, the argument can be made that the uniqueness of popular education is also valuable as a commodity that is exchangeable for the sake of monetary profit in the pursuit of new students. This is discussed further below.
**Commodifying Popular Education**

The commodification of popular education is not only mobilized through the way those working at popular education institutions talk about themselves as unique, in line with how Barthes (1993b) defines an essential feature of a myth as its ability to be appropriated. The uniqueness of popular education is also mobilized by politicians in legitimizing state funding for popular education. A recent example of this is Aida Hadžialić, former Social Democratic Minister of Adult Learning, who in 2016 justified significant state funding for popular education institutions to work with adult refugees:

> We know that study associations are good at meeting people from different backgrounds. Thus, the government has awarded this task to study associations. Important factors are that study associations are experienced in working with asylum seekers and newly arrived migrants, they reach every municipality, they can be flexible and quickly start new activities. (Swedish Adult Education Association, 2016, p. 11)

The quotation illustrates not only how the myth is mobilized by different actors but also how the myth is actually exchanged into monetary value. Such an exchange is not unique to contemporary times; examples can be found throughout history where the state has given popular education a range of commissioned tasks, which reflects a state view of popular education as being important, flexible but above all reliable (see, e.g., Edquist & Berg, 2017). The strong support for popular education and the appropriation of the myth by policy makers can also be partly explained by the fact that many members of parliament throughout the 20th century gained their schooling at folk high schools (Nordvall & Fridolfsson, 2019).

This does not mean, however, that these initiatives are merely top down. Rather, initiatives are often taken by popular education actors themselves, and are then transformed into state policies and funding. This is, for example, the case with Swedish from Day 1. Similar activities had previously been carried out by some study associations but without any state sanctioning or funding. As one manager at ABF explains,

> We had a small group [of newly arrived asylum seekers] as a side activity, but we could not report their participation and get funding since they didn’t have social security numbers. We had a discussion about we should end these activities since they only generated a cost, but I was there observing the circle, talking to others, and was a little annoyed since it was a fantastic activity and an obvious part of ABF’s work. (Manager at ABF)

Above, the manager describes how the general state funding for popular education can only be used to fund activities directed at people who have a social security number, that is, persons who have a resident permit (thus excluding asylum seekers). However, ABF carried out these activities anyway, as—according to the manager—this is an “obvious part of ABF’s work,” making reference to the historical legacy of ABF. The manager further elaborates on how ABF approached the Swedish Migration Board and
politicians in connection with the migration movements in 2015, explaining the value popular education could provide by working with newly arrived asylum seekers.

This was also the case in relation to the work with newly arrived young adult asylum seekers and refugees at folk high schools. As the principal at one of the folk high schools explained, they had conducted activities for this target group before. When the legislation changed, they found a loophole allowing them to continue with some of the activities, but without the sanctioning of the state. Thus, when migration movements increased in 2015, they managed to persuade the government to reintroduce state support for these kinds of activities.

For 7 or 8 years we have offered boarding at the school for unaccompanied minors, which was designed as a package: you live and study here. [. . .] Then the legislation changed and it was no longer permitted [for the municipality] to outsource this kind of education program. But we kept the boarding option. (Principal at FHS)

In both these cases, activities that were launched in the wake of the migration movements of 2015, and then funded by the state, were originally activities that were already carried out by popular education institutions. This could thus be seen as a contemporary example of what Larsson (2013) speaks of as popular education (in his case specifically folk high schools) as forerunners in pedagogical development. In the subsequent lobbying, the myth of the uniqueness of popular education was mobilized as an argument for state funding. The result being new formal tasks assigned to popular education institutions. Or in other words, the myth of the uniqueness of popular education is turned into monetary funds.

**Discussion**

In this article, we have illustrated how the myth of the uniqueness of popular education is made up of three rhetorical figures that are mobilized and appropriated by a range of actors legitimizing state support for popular education. The myth thus becomes a “tool” that commodifies popular education, that is, turns the myth into monetary funds. By going back to the history of popular education, by describing popular education as free and voluntarily, and by arguing that popular education has a specific pedagogy, claims are made that popular education has a uniqueness compared with other educational institutions and activities. Such a claim is in turn used as an argument for why popular education should be awarded commissioned tasks from the government in providing a range of services for adults—in this case, educational work with newly arrived asylum seekers. As a myth, the uniqueness here becomes a grand narrative describing virtuous people doing exceptional things with a specific purpose of morally guiding for suitable action (Barthes, 1993a). Through reference to historical events, popular education emerges as something pure, good, and desirable.

What is striking is how the myth is appropriated by such a range of actors, not only by those who are themselves active within the popular education institutions. As we have illustrated, politicians draw on the myth legitimizing public spending on popular
education, participants reproduce the myth when speaking about their education (see Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson, et al., 2018) and researchers are engaged in appropriating and reproducing the myth, not only by writing about the myth—as we do here—but also by taking the myth, the uniqueness of popular education as granted, as existing, and as something normatively good (see, e.g., Gustavsson, 1996; Sundgren, 1980). Such production and reproduction of a specific branch of the education system, is unique in the Swedish context (cf. Andersén et al., 2003; Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson, et al., 2018).

As we have argued, what happens to the myth of uniqueness is not only that it might legitimize what is deemed by many to be something good. Rather, it also does so by mobilizing processes of commodification, in which popular education becomes a product just like any other product on the market. The myth comes to function as a marketing strategy, as a way to argue for why popular education, rather than a private education company, for example, should deliver certain courses and measures directed at certain target groups.

Without evaluating the truthfulness of what is claimed in the name of popular education, reading this education form as a myth through the lens of Barthes (1993b) complicates any claim of uniqueness. According to Barthes, the alleged uniqueness of popular education is the result of many diverse and contradictory histories, actors and events; in terms of form (mythical signification), history and memory are emptied (Bazzul, 2015). Reminiscences and knowledge that complicates the history of popular education must be emptied and vacated to make way for the mythical notion of the uniqueness of popular education. This is not to suggest that the form of myth destroys all meaning, making a clean slate. Rather, the myth merely diminishes meaning since it must be able to obtain, from the meaning (the uniqueness of popular education), whatever it needs to become rooted.

While our reading here has been a critical one, it is important to note that popular education, however unique (or not) it might be, has gained widespread trust. Not only among the “public” and those who engage with the popular education institutions, but also among politicians. In one way this is quite extraordinary, not least taking into account the fact that the state, based more or less on trust alone, can decide to award popular education large sums of money to organize activities for adult asylum seekers. If the equivalent funds were spent on the regular education system to take such a task on itself, more regulations (such as accountability) could be expected to be put in place.

In the end, our hope is that this kind of analysis can contribute to further debates on what popular education is and might be, and what role such an important historical and contemporary practice might play in the future. Not the least, we believe that the Swedish case can provide insights valuable to other locations. As illustrated in the introduction, even though there are some commonalities across popular education in different locations, the relation between popular education and the State differs across locations (see Kane, 2013). The Swedish case provides insights into how popular education, in a location where the relationship to the State has been close for the past Century, still manages to reproduce a myth of being unique. A work that seems to be successful, at least in gaining monetary funds, and in doing “good” work with asylum seekers.
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Note
1. Municipal adult education (MAE) is the main formal adult education institution in Sweden. MAE is governed by a national curriculum, and provides education for adults equivalent to a compulsory and upper secondary school, as well as education in Swedish for immigrants. MAE is funded by municipalities, and they have to offer this for free to all its citizens who do not have complete compulsory and/or upper secondary school degrees. For more information see Fejes, Dahlstedt, Olson, et al. (2018).

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