

# “The Swedish *Sonderweg* in Question: Democratization and Inequality in Comparative Perspective, c. 1750–1920”

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## **Abstract**

In the twentieth century, Sweden became known as a country with an unusually egalitarian distribution of income and wealth, an encompassing welfare state, and an exceptionally strong Social Democracy. It is commonplace among historians and social scientists to consider these equal outcomes of the twentieth century as the logical end result of a much longer historical trajectory of egalitarianism, from early modern free peasant farmers or from a peculiar Swedish political culture, egalitarian and consensus-oriented. This essay questions this Swedish *Sonderweg* interpretation. In 1900, Sweden had some of the most unequal voting laws in Western Europe, and more severe economic inequality than the United States. This puts the purported continuity from early modern equality to Social Democratic equality in question. The roots of twentieth-century Swedish egalitarianism lie in exceptionally well organized popular movements after 1870, with a strong egalitarian counter-hegemonic culture and unusually broad popular participation in politics.

**Keywords:** inequality, Sweden, social structure, social history, *Sonderweg*

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## I. A Swedish *Sonderweg*?

In history as well as in the social sciences, it is tempting to interpret modern-era outcomes, often on the national level, in the spheres of politics and economics as the results of long-term trajectories. One can think of Macfarlane's thesis of a continuity of individualism in English society since the thirteenth century, or the analysis of German history which claims that Germany fell prey to Fascism because of its lack of a bourgeois revolution, which left the country off the 'normal' path of liberal modernization and instead put it on a *Sonderweg* dominated by conservative nobles and militaries.<sup>1</sup>

Sweden in the twentieth century became known for its 'middle way' between capitalism and socialism, as a country with high degrees of economic equality, an encompassing welfare state, and exceptionally strong Social Democracy. It has become commonplace to see Sweden's twentieth-century egalitarianism as the outcome of a long historical trajectory, a Swedish *Sonderweg*. In different formulations, the Swedish *Sonderweg* thesis stresses the heritage of a free and politically active farmer class, economic egalitarianism, and a responsive state. Within Sweden, this idea has reached 'the status of a national myth', as it has been embraced not only by professional historians but also by political parties and a wider interested community. The latest example is a successful and influential book of popular history, which present equality as the 'fate' of the Swedish people.<sup>2</sup> The Swedish *Sonderweg* analysis in its

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<sup>1</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *The Origins of English Individualism: The Family Property and Social Transition* (Oxford, 1978). Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Das deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918* (Göttingen, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Sweden's reputation: Jenny Andersson, 'A Model of Welfare Capitalism? Perspectives on the Swedish Model, Then and Now', in Jon Pierre (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics* (Oxford, 2006). 'National myth': Mary Hilson, 'A Consensual Democracy? The Historical Roots of the Swedish Model', in Lars Edgren and Magnus Olofsson (eds.), *Political Outsiders in Swedish History, 1848–1932* (Newcastle, 2009); the quotation is on p. 138. On political parties see Åsa Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia: Historieskrivning som ideologisk maktresurs 1892–2000* (Stockholm, 2000). Equality as 'fate': Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige* (Stockholm, paperback ed., 2009), quotation on p. 44.

various guises also has gained currency in the international research literature, and is standard in textbooks.<sup>3</sup>

However, the factual basis of the Swedish *Sonderweg* interpretation is weak. This essay discusses Swedish political and social development from the mid-eighteenth century to the 1920s, the period when Sweden modernizes and transforms from an agrarian society undoubtedly ruled by the monarchy and nobility, to an industrial economy with political democracy. It is shown that the *Sonderweg* thesis misconstrues what kind of road Sweden took to modernity. In fact, Sweden c. 1850–1920 was severely unequal. In 1900, it was one of the countries in Western Europe with the most restricted suffrage, and wealth was more unequally distributed than in the famously inegalitarian United States. Thus, there is no unbroken continuity of egalitarianism in Swedish history, and any potential pre-modern relative equality cannot explain twentieth century Social Democratic equality.

The discontinuity is illustrated by Figure 1. It might be expected that the Scandinavian countries, in the late twentieth century distinguished by redistributive Social Democratic welfare states<sup>4</sup>, would be marked by an inheritance of relative equality. However, recent studies of Sweden since 1903, Denmark since 1870 and Norway since 1875 contradict this expectation. The Swedish researchers state: ‘Sweden was not more equal than other Western countries at the beginning of the twentieth century’.<sup>5</sup>

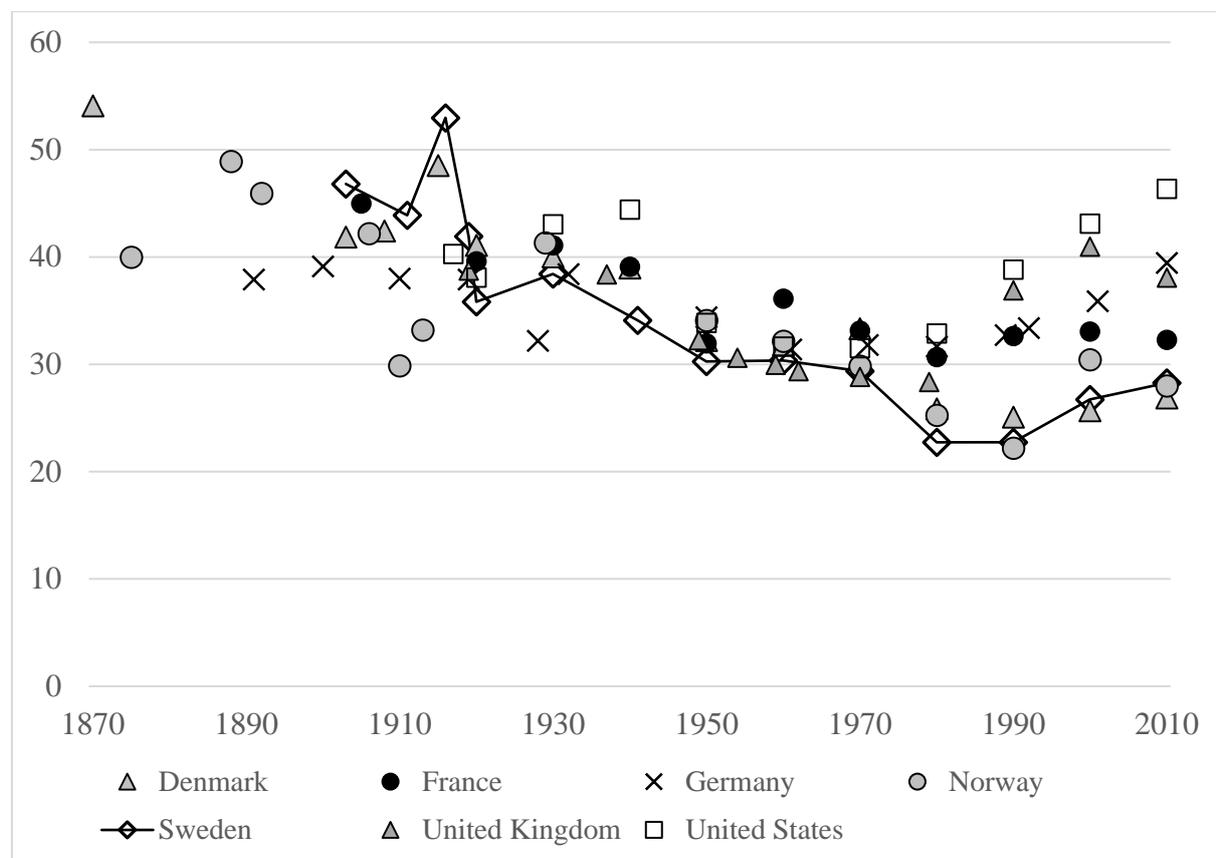
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<sup>3</sup> International literature: Matti Alesstalo and Stein Kuhnle, ‘The Scandinavian Route: Economic, Social, and Political Developments in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden’, *International Journal of Sociology* 16 (1987); Francis G. Castles, ‘Barrington Moore’s Thesis and Swedish Political Development’, *Government and Opposition*, 8 (1973); Brad DeLong, ‘Book Review: Growing Public by Peter Lindert’, *Journal of Economic History*, 67 (2007); Tim Tilton, ‘The Social Origins of Liberal Democracy: The Case of Sweden’, *American Political Science Review*, 68 (1974). Textbooks: Tommy Möller, *Svensk politisk historia: Strid och samverkan under tvåhundra år* (Lund, 2007), on Swedish political history.

<sup>4</sup> Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (Princeton, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Quotation from Jesper Roine and Daniel Waldenström, ‘The Evolution of Top Incomes in an Egalitarian Society: Sweden, 1903–2004’, *Journal of Public Economics*, 92 (2008), p. 385. Denmark and Norway: Anthony B. Atkinson and Jakob Eghold Søgaaard, ‘The Long-Run History of Income Inequality in Denmark’, *The Scandinavian Journal of Economics*, 118 (2016); Rolf Aaberge, Anthony B. Atkinson and Jørgen Modalsli, ‘On the Measurement of Long-Run Income Inequality: Empirical Evidence from Norway, 1875–2013’, Statistics Norway Research Department Discussion Papers (Oslo, 2016).

**Figure 1. Income inequality: share of national income accruing to the top decile, 1870-2010**



Note. The data comes from The World Wealth and Income Database – WID, available at <http://www.wid.world>. Data only shown for every tenth year (or when available), to enhance readability of the graph.

Figure 1 shows that while the three Scandinavian countries were the most equal ones in 1970-2010, this is not at all the case in the early twentieth century, when Swedish and Norwegian income inequality was higher than that in allegedly reactionary Germany, and on par with that in France, the UK and the US. There is a puzzle here, a turn-around to explain.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Eley’s argument against the German *Sonderweg* thesis, on the need to redirect focus from the long run to more short-term causes of the Fascist disaster. David Blackbourn and Geoff Eley, *The Peculiarities of German History: Bourgeois Society and Politics in Nineteenth-century Germany* (Oxford, 1984), 154.

## II. The Swedish *Sonderweg* view

Under the label ‘the Swedish *Sonderweg* view’ are gathered analyses which in different ways point to a unique Swedish (or broadly Scandinavian) historical legacy of egalitarianism. Three varieties will be discussed: a class-based one following Barrington Moore, a more socio-culturally grounded one, and one focusing on political culture. Beyond these three versions, it is a common assumption in the social sciences and history to assume that Sweden/Scandinavia in the early modern period had ‘a more equal social structure than the rest of Europe’<sup>7</sup>, and that this has explanatory power for the later developments of the country/region. Thus, the implications of the argument of this essay are not necessarily limited to the precise researchers discussed in this section.

### *The Barrington Moore model*

In historical sociologist Barrington Moore’s model of ‘routes to the modern world’, whether a country ends up on a bourgeois-democratic, authoritarian-fascist, or communist route, depends on the country’s constellation of class forces during modernization. According to Moore, British and French modernization was led by bourgeois liberals, while in Prussia-Germany the dominance of the old landowning nobility (the *Junkers*) led to an authoritarian route, and in Russia and China the absence of capitalist modernization in agriculture led to a peasant revolt cum Communist revolution.

In the 1970s, two Anglophone researchers tested Moore’s model on the Swedish case. Castles found that the bourgeoisie was comparatively weak in Sweden, and in fact after 1809 subservient allies to the nobility, in precisely the kind of coalition (‘iron and rye’) which in Moore’s model would lead to authoritarianism. Castles pointed to the existence of a strong

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<sup>7</sup> Bo Rothstein and Eric Uslaner, ‘All for All: Equality, Corruption, and Social Trust’, *World Politics*, 58 (2005), 57.

peasant farmer class as the factor which saved Sweden from the authoritarian route: ‘in a sense, the farmers held the line until industrialism produced a liberal middle class capable of asserting its own rights’. Timothy Tilton found less of an authoritarian threat in Swedish history than Castles did, but just as Castles, he emphasized the role of the peasant farmers.<sup>8</sup> In Tilton’s analysis, Sweden was never fully feudal, and with reference to an English-language history of Sweden from 1931, he claimed that the nobility only held 10 per cent of the land, which is both quite unhistorical – of course this share varied over time – and quite misleading. In fact, the nobility, which was around 0.5 per cent of the population, held about 20-25 per cent of arable land from the late mediaeval period to 1600, 65 per cent in 1658, and one third in 1700.<sup>9</sup> Just like Castles, Tilton claimed that the peasantry was extraordinarily important in Sweden, and politically played the liberal role played by the bourgeoisie in Moore’s model: ‘The size and strength of the independent Swedish peasantry can hardly be overemphasized, for in Sweden the peasants often played the role that the bourgeoisie played elsewhere as an agency for preserving the balance between the monarchy and the nobility.’<sup>10</sup> The analysis where a strong independent peasantry plays the role of a guarantee of democracy in the lack of a strong urban bourgeoisie, is represented in a different theoretical context also by for example Anderson.<sup>11</sup>

### *A peasant-oriented approach*

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<sup>8</sup> Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Boston, 1966). ‘The farmers held the line’: Castles, ‘Barrington Moore’s Thesis’, 327; cf. 330. Tilton, ‘Social Origins of Liberal Democracy’.

<sup>9</sup> Janken Myrdal, *Jordbruket under feodalismen 1000–1700* (Stockholm, 1999), 334; Carl-Johan Gadd, *Den agrara revolutionen 1700-1870* (Stockholm, 2000), 17. Similarly to Tilton, the otherwise excellent Dietrich Rueschemeyer, Evelyne Huber Stephens and John D. Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy* (Cambridge, 1994), 93, rely on modernization theorists’ descriptions from the 1950s which leads to an underestimation of the nobles.

<sup>10</sup> Tilton, ‘Social Origins of Liberal Democracy’, 565.

<sup>11</sup> Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London, 1974), ch. 7. In comparative political economy, the independent peasantry likewise puts Scandinavia on its special route. See for example the analysis of Peter J. Katzenstein, *Small States in World Markets: Industrial Policy in Europe* (Ithaca, NY, 1985), 35, 140–143, 157–159. Katzenstein, who cites Tilton on the allegedly weak nobility in Sweden, claims that ‘The absence of a strong feudal tradition is equally striking in Scandinavia.’ (p. 159).

A long historical trajectory of egalitarianism is also claimed in a less materialist, more cultural-historical tradition of research. In this interpretation, the Scandinavian countries took a peasant-dominated route to modernity, which was marked by an egalitarian society and an egalitarian culture. Sørensen and Stråth claim that there was a specific ‘Nordic Enlightenment’ which ‘had the peasant as its foremost symbol /.../ as the mythical incarnation of education (*bildning/dannelse*), freedom, and equality.’ Sweden had peasant farmer representation in parliament since the fifteenth century, and this is symbolic of a ‘Nordic Sonderweg’ where the Social Democracy of the twentieth century is seen as a continuation of a Lutheran peasant farmer culture where social liberalism and social democracy coalesce.<sup>12</sup> Unlike in Continental Europe where democratization was extending noble rights to everyone, in Scandinavia, ‘the construction of modern democracy can be seen as a process of generalizing the political culture of the local peasant assembly.’<sup>13</sup> According to Sørensen and Stråth and their followers, the lack of feudalism and the political representation for farmers meant that farmers played a larger role in the Nordic countries than in other European societies, and early modern and nineteenth century farmer populism paved the way for twentieth century Social Democracy.

### *The political culture variant of the Sonderweg thesis*

The historian Eva Österberg has launched an interpretation where the ‘Swedish model’ of consensus-seeking, compromise-friendly, rationalist policy making, most often associated with

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<sup>12</sup> Quotations from Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, ‘Introduction’, in Sørensen and Stråth (eds.), *The Cultural Construction of Norden* (Oslo, 1997), 1. For similar analyses, influenced by Sørensen and Stråth, see Niels Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem: Nordisk demokrati og nationalisme - fra pietismen til 2. Verdenskrig* (Aarhus, 2008); Niels Finn Christiansen and Pirjo Markkola, ‘Introduction’, in Christiansen, Klaus Petersen, Nils Edling and Per Haave (eds.) *The Nordic Model of Welfare – a Historical Reappraisal* (Copenhagen, 2006). For an early formulation of the Sonderweg analysis see Bo Stråth, ‘Continuity and Discontinuity in Passing Front I and II. Swedish 19th Century Civil Society: Culture, Social Formations and Political Change’, in Stråth (ed.), *Democratisation in Scandinavia in Comparison* (Gothenburg, 1988). Åmark’s critical comments attached to Stråth’s chapter in many ways accord with the argument of this essay. Stråth has reiterated the *Sonderweg* analysis in ‘Nordic Modernity: Origins, Trajectories and Prospects’, *Thesis Eleven*, 77 (2004).

<sup>13</sup> Lars Trägårdh, ‘Statist Individualism: On the Culturality of the Nordic Welfare State’, in Sørensen and Stråth (eds.), *Cultural Construction of Norden*, quotations on pp. 258 and 259.

the period after the Social Democratic ascension to government after 1932, actually starts in the sixteenth century. Österberg stresses the relative dearth of peasant uprisings after the 1530s and farmers' political representation in parliament to state that there was a degree of consensus between the rulers and the ruled. The extent of peasant farmer involvement in local politics and as lay representatives in local courts is stressed by Österberg as these involvements meant regular contacts between the state and the ruled. Two keywords in her argument are "interaction" and "negotiation", and she claims that the frequent interactions between rulers and the ruled created a consensus-oriented political culture in Sweden, where rulers to an unusual degree derived their legitimacy from the negotiations with the subjects.<sup>14</sup>

It is no simple matter to determine the degree to which Österberg's description of Swedish political culture is correct. Her interpretation has caught criticism for downplaying power inequalities between the rulers and the ruled, and critics have claimed that the lack of peasant uprisings after the 1530s depended more on the considerable repressive capacities of the standing armies developed in this period, than on any consensus between rulers and the ruled.<sup>15</sup> These are good points but from the point of view of this essay more importantly Österberg's analysis (1) is silent about the existence of proletarian and semi-proletarian groups who were excluded from the political arenas stressed by Österberg, and (2) sees a continuity from the early modern period to the twentieth century, which this essay questions in terms of political and economic inequality.

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<sup>14</sup> Eva Österberg, 'Bönder och centralmakt i det tidigmoderna Sverige: Konflikt - kompromiss - politisk kultur', *Scandia*, 55 (1989); 'Fredliga Moder Svea – socio-politiskt våld och den svenska modellen', in Österberg (ed.), *Socialt och politiskt våld: perspektiv på svensk historia* (Lund, 2002). Followers: Peter Aronsson, *Bönder gör politik: Det lokala självstyret som social arena i tre smålandssocknar, 1680–1850* (Lund, 1992); Mathias Cederholm, *De värjde sin rätt: senmedeltida bondemotstånd i Skåne och Småland* (Lund, 2007). For a recent discussion of Österberg's argument, see Mats Hallenberg and Johan Holm, *Man ur huse: Hur krig, upplopp och förhandlingar påverkade svensk statsbildning i tidigmodern tid* (Lund, 2016). Hallenberg and Holm support Österberg's argument in showing the importance of negotiations between rulers and subjects in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but also show the limitations of the argument by showing the lack of political opportunities for propertyless groups, and the recurring conflicts between the proletarians and the state as well as the farmers.

<sup>15</sup> Börje Harnesk, 'Den svenska modellens tidigmoderna rötter?', *Historisk tidskrift* 122 (2002); Hilson, 'A Consensual Democracy?'; Martin Linde, *I fädrens spår? Bönder och överhet i Dalarna under 1700-talet* (Hedemora, 2009).

### III. The Swedish *ancien regime*, c. 1750–1850

The Swedish *Sonderweg* view in all its guises stresses the role of the free farmers. And it is true that when Prussia abolished serfdom in 1810 or Russia in 1861, this had since long happened in Sweden, where serfdom gradually disappeared between 1000 and 1300 CE.<sup>16</sup> However, this does not mean that the Swedish economy and polity were egalitarian and inclusive. I will here present two objections. One, that while the peasant farmers were indeed acknowledged as political actors, they were very much a subordinate actor in a game dominated by the élite. Two, the peasant-centred story misses the fact that the peasants weren't the lowest strata of society. The inclusion of this lower strata of labourers, and a correct appreciation of the role of the nobility, alters the tenor of the account of Swedish modernization.

#### *Farmers and other people*

In 1750, 80 per cent of the rural, commoner, household heads were peasant farmers. However, this figure includes the tenants of the nobility, so we must not assume that all of them owned land. It was only the freeholders and the tenants on crown land who were represented in parliament; the nobility's tenants had no voting rights. From 1750 to 1850 landless rural groups grew, and in 1850 the share of household heads who were farmers had decreased from 80 to 50 per cent.<sup>17</sup> The socially significant parts of the rural population who were proletarian or semi-proletarian are to a large degree overlooked by the *Sonderweg* view, where all emphasis is on the strength of the independent peasantry.

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<sup>16</sup> Myrdal, *Jordbruket under feodalismen*, 93–97.

<sup>17</sup> Janken Myrdal and Mats Morell (eds.), *The Agrarian History of Sweden: 4000 BC to AD 2000* (Lund, 2011), Statistical Appendix. It must be stressed that the household statistic is patriarchal in the sense that it is *household heads* who are counted. In other words, lodgers, servants and other landless workers who lived in the household of a farmer are not counted. For this reason, the degree of proletarianization is much underestimated, which has been highlighted by recent local studies. Tommy Bengtsson and Martin Dribe, 'New Evidence on the Standard of Living in Sweden during the 18th and 19th Centuries' (Lund, 2002); Riikka Miettinen and Jonas Lindström, 'The Livelihood Tactics of the Landless in the Early Modern Swedish Countryside', (mimeo, Tampere and Uppsala, 2017).

The English author Mary Wollstonecraft was on her trip to Sweden in 1796 shocked of how servants were treated. She wrote:

‘In fact, the situation of the servants in every respect, particularly that of the women, shows how far the Swedes are from having a just conception of rational equality. They are not termed slaves; yet a man may strike a man with impunity because he pays him wages, though these wages are so low that necessity must teach them to pilfer, whilst servility renders them false and boorish.’<sup>18</sup>

Traditionally the image has been that to be a servant in agrarian Sweden was a life-cycle occupation; i.e., that children of farmers were servants in their youth, until they became old enough to inherit the farm. Then, around the age of 30, they transitioned from being a servant to being a self-owning farmer; thus, to be a servant would be seen as a life-cycle trait rather than a class position. However, as the population grew after 1750 and a smaller share of the new generations could inherit or afford to buy a farm, the servant occupation became less of a life cycle phenomenon and ever more people became life-long wage labourers.<sup>19</sup>

Labour in Sweden was until 1885 regulated under a regime which stipulated that if one could not live off one’s property, and did not have employment, one could be sentenced to forced labour. Sweden was the last among the Nordic countries to abolish this regulation, after Denmark and Norway in the 1850s, and Finland in 1863. That this ‘essentially feudal coercive measure’ was in place until 1885 tells us something important about the nature of Swedish society in this period. In 1885 the old labour regime was replaced by regulation of

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<sup>18</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, ‘Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark’, Letter III. Available at: <https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/w/wollstonecraft/mary/w864/letter3.html>. Accessed 30 May 2017.

<sup>19</sup> Christer Lundh, ‘The Social Mobility of Servants in Rural Sweden, 1740–1894’, *Continuity and Change*, 14 (1999); Carolina Uppenbergh, ‘The Servant Institution during the Swedish Agrarian Revolution – the Political Economy of Subservience’, in Jane Whittle (ed.) *Servants in Rural Europe 1400–1900* (Martlesham, 2017).

‘drifters’ and ‘vagrants’, which still allowed for the punishment of for example strikers who were temporarily without employment.<sup>20</sup>

### *Farmers and politics, c. 1750–1850*

As discussed in section II, Castles, Tilton, Stråth, Österberg and others have all presented the peasant farmers and their political representation as the guarantor of a democratic and egalitarian route to modernity in Sweden. For the farmers to play this function, they must have (1) stood for an inclusive politics, and (2) exerted influence. Based on the Swedish-language political history literature, I will now discuss these two points, beginning with the second.

The Swedish-language political history literature portrays the farmers very much as a subordinate partner. There was no peasant farmer in government until 1906, when the progressive liberal Peterson in Påboda became the minister for education. Governments were dominated by estate-owners, militaries and bureaucrats, with added capitalists and merchants after 1850. Among the four estates in the four-estate diet which was in place until 1865, the farmers’ estate was the only one which never got the right to elect its own speaker; this was the King’s right. Furthermore, it was the one estate which was not represented on the Privy Committee, the most important parliamentary committee. Among the four estates, the nobility and the clergy played a conservative role. The farmers were more oppositional. Since decisions were made by a majority of the estates, the burghers had an important role in the middle.<sup>21</sup>

So, the peasant farmer politicians were subordinate. We can still ask if they ideologically played the role of a democratic-liberal avant-garde?<sup>22</sup> Many Swedish political historians, unconscious of the great role played by the farmers in the international comparative

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<sup>20</sup> Theresa Johnsson, *Vårt fredliga samhälle: "Lösdriveri" och försvarslöshet i Sverige under 1830-talet* (Uppsala, 2016), 14, 16.

<sup>21</sup> Andreas Tjerneld, *Från borgarståndets storhetstid: Statsbudgeten som partiskiljande fråga i den sena ståndsriksdagen* (Stockholm, 1983).

<sup>22</sup> As in Alestalo and Kuhnle, ‘Scandinavian Route’; Anderson, *Lineages*, ch. 7; Castles, ‘Barrington Moore’s Thesis’; Tilton, ‘Social Origins’.

literature, have on the contrary portrayed the peasant farmer politicians as narrow-minded, conservative, reactive, loyal to the King, and focused on very specific issues such as the right to home production of licquor. This image is so common that one of the more recent studies of farmer politicians asks in the title: ‘Primitive farmers?’.<sup>23</sup> Of course, there are also a few historians who have viewed peasant farmers and their political representatives as proactive agents in Swedish 19th century politics. Alexandersson in his dissertation about the peasant estate in parliament 1760–1772 revises the common image of the peasant parliamentarians as unengaged and lazy. Likewise, Hultqvist shows both that given that the lion part of public expenditures were funded with land taxes, and noble land was exempt from tax, in reality the peasant farmers were the most heavily taxed group, and that the bureaucracy was privileged and dominated by nobles. For these reasons, as Christensen shows, the intense criticism from peasant politicians against state bureaucracy and public spending c. 1850–1880 must not necessarily be seen as the result of short-sighted penny pinching, but can rather be seen as founded in real inequalities and injustice. In the mid-nineteenth century, the peasant politicians indeed appeared as conservative in issues of finance and banking, but not as void of ideology and not as one-sided opponents of any public investments.<sup>24</sup>

In conclusion, the farmer politicians at least to some degree were a democratic voice. Christensen in the best study of this issue shows that in the nineteenth century before the 1865 reform, the ancien regime was defended by a conservative group of bureaucrats and estate

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<sup>23</sup> Kalle Bäck, *Bondeopposition och bondeinflytande under frihetstiden: Centralmakten och östgötaböndernas reaktioner i näringspolitiska frågor* (Stockholm, 1984); Göran B. Nilsson, ‘Svensk liberalism vid mitten av 1800-talet’, in Steven Koblik (ed.), *Från fattigdom till överflöd* (Stockholm, 1973); Torbjörn Nilsson, *Elitens svängrum: Första kammaren, staten och moderniseringen 1867–1886* (Stockholm, 1994). Primitive farmers: Anders Claréus, ‘Primitiva bönder? Något om allmogens syn på statsmakt, politik och nation under 1700-talet’, in Åsa Karlsson and Bo Lindberg (eds.), *Nationalism och nationell identitet i 1700-talets Sverige* (Uppsala, 2002); cf. historiographical comments in Joakim Scherp, *De ofrälse och makten: En institutionell studie av riksdagen och de ofrälse ståndens politik i maktodelningsfrågor 1660-1682* (Stockholm, 2013), 19–25.

<sup>24</sup> Erland Alexandersson, *Bondeståndet i riksdagen 1760–1772* (Lund, 1975), 70–76; Per Hultqvist, *Riksdagsopinionen och ämbetsmannaintressena: från representationsreformen till 1880-talets början* (Gothenburg, 1954); Jan Christensen, *Bönder och herrar: Bondeståndet i 1840-talets liberala representationsdebatt. Exempler Gustaf Hierta och JP Theorell* (Gothenburg, 1997).

owners, while the liberal-democratic opposition was led by anti-bureaucratic liberal newspapermen, in an interesting alliance with the progressive wing of the farmers in parliament. But Christensen also shows how the peasant farmers to a large degree focused on defending the interest of their own class vis-à-vis their exploitation by estate owners and the state, and to a much lower degree on the interests of the property-less groups, in for example to access to schooling.<sup>25</sup>

### *The nobility*

A key part of Swedish ‘whig history’ is to write off the nobility as unimportant to general social development after c. 1800.<sup>26</sup> Sten Carlsson’s analysis of the alleged downfall of the Swedish nobility has been very influential. Carlsson pointed to especially two reforms as indicative. One, the opening up of higher posts in the state for commoners by a reform in 1789. Two, the opening up in 1789 and 1809 that commoners could buy tax-exempt land which until then was reserved for nobles. On both points, Carlsson’s interpretation – coloured as it was by the Swedish belief in an egalitarian exceptionalism – has been shown to be flawed. Norrby in his revisionist dissertation on the Swedish nobility in the nineteenth century shows that the nobility continued to dominate the higher echelons of the bureaucracy and military also after the 1789 reform, by virtue of their superior education and social and cultural capital. On land-owning, Winberg showed that contrary to Carlsson’s assumptions, the nobility in parliament in no way was united against the 1809 reform.<sup>27</sup> Many of them realized that the creation of a freer, more capitalist market for tax-exempt land in no way forced them to sell, and would indeed increase the price

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<sup>25</sup> Christensen, *Bönder och herrar*, 278–281, 293–294. On Swedish nineteenth century liberalism and the relative importance of urban liberals and farmers see also Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem*, 193.

<sup>26</sup> Erik Bengtsson, Anna Missiaia, Mats Olsson and Patrick Svensson, ‘The Wealth of the Richest: Inequality and the Nobility, 1750–1900’, Lund Papers in Economic History, no. 161 (Lund, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Sten Carlsson, *Ståndssamhälle och ståndspersoner 1700–1865: studier rörande det svenska ståndssamhällets upplösning* (2 ed., Lund, 1973); Göran Norrby, *Adel i förvandling: Adliga strategier och identiteter i 1800-talets borgerliga samhälle* (Uppsala, 2005), 309; Christer Winberg, *Grenverket: Studier rörande jord, släktskapssystem och ståndsprivilegier* (Stockholm, 1985), 164–182, 200.

of this land, benefitting them as current holders and aiding them in the restructuring of their investments when they so wanted. Further research by shows that nobles' ownership of other types of land indeed increased after 1809. More recent research by Clark shows that still today, Swedish nobles are severely over-represented in high-prestige professions law and medicine, and are significantly wealthier than non-nobles. The idea that the nobility lost out during an allegedly 'bourgeois' nineteenth century once fit the whig history of Marxists and liberals, but does not square with the facts of Swedish history.<sup>28</sup>

#### IV. The persistence of the old regime, 1850–1920

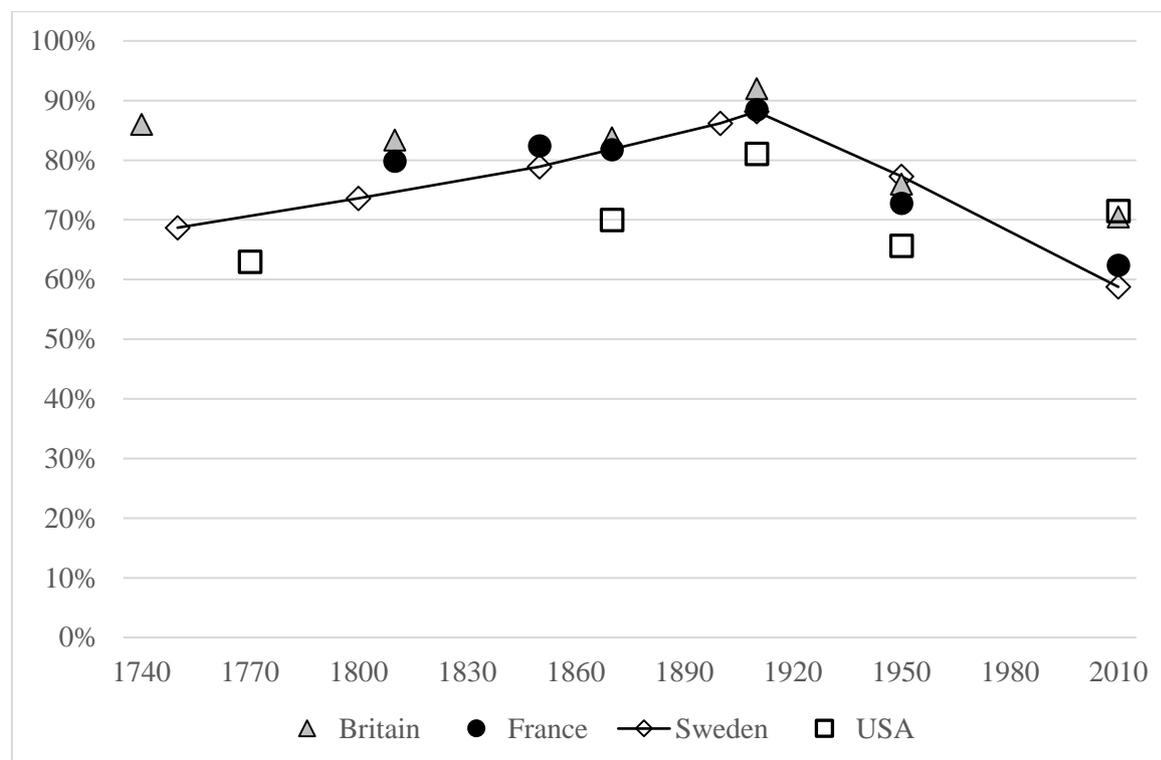
##### *Economic inequality*

As shown in section I, in the early twentieth century, Sweden was no more egalitarian in terms of income distribution than Germany, the United States and other capitalist economies. To get further back in time, we need to turn to wealth inequality. In pre-industrial society with a large degree of subsistence economy, this is a better measure of economic inequality than the distribution of incomes. Swedish wealth distribution since 1750 is shown in Figure 2, building on new research, and in comparison with the three other countries for which long-run data are available: Britain, France and the US.

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<sup>28</sup> Other land: Norrby, *Adel i förvandling*, 74-75; Göran Ulväng, 'Betydelsen av att äga en herrgård: Herrgårdar, ståndsgårdar och gods i Uppsala län under 1700- och 1800-talen', *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, 98 (2013). Continued over-representation: Gregory Clark, *The Son Also Rises* (Princeton, 2014), ch. 2. Against whig history: Bengtsson et al., 'Wealth of the Richest'.

**Figure 2. Top decile's share of total wealth: Sweden in an international perspective 1750–2010**



*Note.* Sources: Britain 1740-1870 from Peter Lindert, ‘Unequal English Wealth since 1670’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 94 (1986), Table 4; US 1774 and 1870 from Carole Shammas, ‘A New Look at Long-term Trends in Wealth Inequality in the United States’, *American Historical Review*, 98 (1993), 424; Sweden 1750–1900 from Erik Bengtsson, Anna Missiaia, Mats Olsson and Patrick Svensson, ‘Wealth Inequality in Sweden, 1750-1900’, *The Economic History Review* (pre-published online, 2017). All other data from Thomas Piketty, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass., 2014).

Wealth inequality grew gradually in Sweden from 1750 to 1900, in several different ways. One powerful mechanism was the growth of the rural proletariat, as discussed in section II: the growth of poor groups with little or no wealth implied a bottom-led growth of inequality. On the other side, inequality also grew from the top (or almost-top) as the non-noble but wealthy class of merchants and capitalists grew in numbers as well as increased their wealth.<sup>29</sup> The end product is wealth distribution in 1850 and 1900 which is not especially equal in a comparative

<sup>29</sup> For elaboration of the analysis see Bengtsson, Missiaia, Olsson and Svensson, ‘Wealth Inequality in Sweden’.

perspective. In 1850, the ten percent wealthiest people held 81 per cent of the private wealth in Sweden, as compared to 82 per cent in France, 84 per cent in the UK, and 70 per cent in the US (in 1870). In other words, Swedish wealth distribution was about as unequal as French and British, and significantly more unequal than American. In 1910, the picture is essentially the same, with the top decile's share at 88 per cent in Sweden, 89 per cent in France, 92 per cent in Britain, and 81 per cent in the US.

#### *Swedish plutocracy in a European perspective*

Sweden in the 1850–1920 period was not only highly unequal economically, but also politically. A key indicator of how inclusive society is, is the share of the population who were enfranchised. Table 1 shows this for elections to the second chamber of parliament or equivalent in the 1890s, in sixteen European countries.

**Table 1. Voting statistics, second chamber or equivalent, around 1896**

	Suffrage, % of population	Suffrage, % of men above 21 years of age	Electoral participation among those with suffrage
Sweden, 1896	6.3	24.0	45.3
Norway, 1898	18.7	77.2	70.4
Denmark, 1898	17.0	65.7	59.7
Great Britain and Ireland, 1897	16.2	64.7	60.9
Netherlands, 1897	11.8	45.1	76.7
Belgium, 1896	21.9	79.4	n.a.
German Reich, 1898	21.2	82.2	68.1
Austria, 1897	19.9	75.6	41.8
Hungary	5.2	19.5	n.a.
Switzerland, 1890	22.6	83.5	58.9
France, 1893	27.2	84.9	71.1
Italy, 1897	6.8	24.2	58.5
Spain, 1891	22.4	82.0	73.7
Portugal, 1890	19.0	74.6	n.a.
Serbia, 1890	16.6	68.0	n.a.
Greece, 1881	23.0	83.7	66.7

Source: *Statistisk Tidskrift* nr. 114-115, 1898, table 20. For comparative suffrage statistics in the 1880s and pre-WW1, see Toké S. Aidt, Dutta, Jayasri, and Loukoianova, Elena ‘Democracy Comes to Europe: Franchise Extension and Fiscal Outcomes 1830–1938’, *European Economic Review*, 50 (2006), Table 2. The picture of Sweden as one of the least democratic countries holds up. See also Johan Karlsson Schaffer, ‘The Forgotten Revolution: Challenging Conventional Wisdom on Sweden’s Transition to Democracy’, (unpublished manuscript, Oslo, 2010) for discussion of this fact.

Sweden in the 1890s had a strikingly low share of enfranchised adult citizens. Among the sixteen European countries compared here, Sweden with 24 per cent of adult men has the lowest share enfranchised after Hungary: much lower than relatively democratic Norway (77 per cent), France (85 per cent), and even Germany (82 per cent). Another revealing fact is the low degree of electoral participation among those few who enjoyed the right to vote: in 1896, less than half of those lucky few cast a ballot. In 1872 the share had been only a fifth; apathy marked Swedish politics during these decades.<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, it was the first chamber which played the role as a conservative guarantee in the Swedish system. This was extremely exclusive: in 1872, only 6,000 men were eligible to elected to the chamber, and in 1885 it was 12,000. The electorate to the first chamber was only about a tenth the size of that for the second chamber.<sup>31</sup>

It is striking how large differences in political participation were between Sweden and its neighbours, Denmark and Norway. Swedish national politics was governed by the 1866 two-chamber order, which replaced the four estates parliament of medieaval tradition. In Denmark, the 1849 constitution made more of a break with the old order, with royal absolutism<sup>32</sup>; likewise, the Norwegian 1814 constitution was more radical than the Swedish of 1866. It seems that the greater degree of inclusiveness in Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century allowed the country to 'lag' in democratic reforms; the 1866 reform is known in the Swedish literature as the 'society-preserving reform' (*samhällsbevarande reformen*) in just its conservatism and inhibiting effect on further reform, showing the great tactical acumen of the elite of estate owners, nobles and capitalists.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Möller, *Svensk politisk historia*, 34.

<sup>31</sup> Dankwart Rustow, *The Politics of Compromise: A Study of Parties and Cabinet Government in Sweden* (reprint, New York, 1969), 23.

<sup>32</sup> On Denmark see Kaspar Hvidt, *Danmarks historie 1850-1900: Det folkelige gennembrud og dets mænd* (Copenhagen, 1990), 55–63.

<sup>33</sup> On continuity see Harald Gustafsson, *Nordens historia: En europeisk region under 1200 år* (Lund, 1997), 205. On the 'society-preserving reform', see Göran B Nilsson, 'Den samhällsbevarande representationsreformen', *Scandia* (1969).

The Swedish election system was even more unequal on the local level. In the municipalities, established in 1862, a minimum level of income or wealth was necessary for the right to vote, and among those with the right to vote, the number of votes was distributed according to their income and/or wealth. In urban municipalities, an individual (which could also be a company) could control up to a hundred votes or 2 per cent of the total votes (5 per cent before 1869); in rural municipalities, there was no such limit. This infamously led to several municipalities being ruled by a ‘dictator’ in the sense that one single individual controlled more than half of the votes. In 1871 this was the case in 54 municipalities, while in 414 localities, more than a quarter of the votes was controlled by a single individual. In the 1880s the prime minister Count Arvid Posse, was one of the local ‘dictators’, due to the value of his family estate.<sup>34</sup> As Mellquist put it, all countries in Europe restricted the franchise of the poor, but no system was as extreme as the Swedish one.<sup>35</sup>

### *Class character of the state*

From the Swedish *Sonderweg*-story, we would expect Sweden to have had a ‘prescient’ welfare state already in the late 1800s or early 1900s. This was not the case. As Lindert shows, there was nothing special about the amounts, as a share of GDP, of the Swedish state’s welfare expenditures (poor relief, health, etc.) between 1880 and 1920.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, in 1913 the share of state expenditures going to the military was especially high in Sweden, which is especially

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<sup>34</sup> For the general picture, see Per Hultqvist, *Försvar och skatter: Studier i svensk riksdagspolitik från representationsreformen till kompromissen 1873* (Gothenburg, 1955), 126. For Posse, see Einar D. Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst? Rösträttsdebatten om den kommunala rösträtten i Sverige 1862–1900* (Stockholm, 1974), 218.

<sup>35</sup> Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst?*, 9. In contrast to the very stark political inequality at the late nineteenth century discussed here, Erik Örjan Emilsson, *Sweden and the European Miracles. Conquest, Growth and Voice* (Gothenburg, 1996), 16, points out that in 1809, 13 per cent of the adult population could vote to parliament, while the corresponding figures for the US in 1820 was less than 8 and Britain before 1831 less than 4. In other words, Sweden’s position in the franchise table might have drastically changed during the nineteenth century. This could be discussed together with the fact, as shown in Figure 2, that wealth inequality increased dramatically from 1800 to 1900.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Lindert, ‘The Rise of Social Spending, 1880–1930’, *Explorations in Economic History*, 31 (1994).

remarkable given that the country had not been at war since 1814. 42 per cent of state spending went to the military, which may be compared to 31 per cent in Norway, 16 in Denmark, 27 in the Netherlands and 25 in Belgium.<sup>37</sup> The description of Sweden as a ‘militarized alms house’ (*det befästa fattighuset*) from a Socialist pamphlet of 1913 is not that far off the mark.

Over the period 1844 to 1905, 56 per cent of government ministers were nobles (while less than 0.5 per cent of the population at large were), and the first non-noble prime minister only entered the post in 1883.<sup>38</sup> From 1876 when the office of prime minister was created to 1905, all Swedish prime ministers were landowners, bureaucrats, militaries or industrialists; in 1905, Karl Staaff, a liberal lawyer, broke the pattern. The neighbouring countries had a markedly broader social recruitment to higher office. Norway drew 12 out of 17 prime ministers between 1876 and 1921 from the free professions (lawyers, professors, teachers, an engineer) and one was even a farmer. Among Denmark’s 21 prime ministers from 1855 to 1920, only four were noble. These four and three others were estate owners, while eight were lawyers, one was a school teacher, three were newspaper men.<sup>39</sup> The social background of the prime ministers was also more exclusive in Sweden. Until Staaff in 1905 all Swedish prime ministers had fathers who were high-rank militaries, factory owners, estate owners, and in one case a bishop; there was nothing like the farmer, carpenter, mason or shoemaker fathers of Danish and Norwegian prime ministers. The recruitment to the highest political office was more exclusive and more ‘old regime’ in Sweden.

### *Farmer politics, 1866–1920*

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<sup>37</sup> Hans Lindblad, *Karl Staaff: Försvaret och demokratin* (Stockholm, 2015), 69.

<sup>38</sup> Göran Norrby, *Ordnade eliter: Organiseringen av Nordens statsbärande skikt 1660–1920* (Stockholm, 2011), 246–7.

<sup>39</sup> Information about the occupations of prime ministers in Sweden and Denmark, and their fathers, has been fetched from Wikipedia: [https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sveriges\\_statsminister](https://sv.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sveriges_statsminister) and [https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danske\\_statsministre](https://da.wikipedia.org/wiki/Danske_statsministre). Corresponding information for Norway is from the Norwegian centre for Research Data’s Archive of Politicians since 1814: <http://www.nsd.uib.no/polsys/>.

In the two-chamber parliament after 1866, farmers made up a large share of the second chamber. While Sweden did not have fully fledged political parties in this period (the protectionism issue in 1888 is seen as fundamental to the party system), most of the second chamber MPs organized either in the moderately liberal Ministerial Party, or in the Country Party (*Lantmannapartiet*). The Country Party organized as a counter-weight to the Ministerial Party, at the initiative of the estate owner Count Arvid Posse, who together with the gentry estate owner Emil Key and the farmer Carl Ifvarsson made up the party leadership. Posse's biographer entertains the idea that the Count, who was a well-known conservative and opponent of the 1865-66 representation reform, organized the party to lead the farmers into a harmless agrarian identity politics, instead of pursuing more radical policies.<sup>40</sup> That farmers organized in a party under the leadership of estate owners is quite unlike the farmers' parties in Denmark and Norway, and is a stark contrast to Rueschemeyer et al's argument, building on Lipset and Rokkan, that Sweden belonged to a group of countries where small-holding farmers organized themselves, in contrast to for example Prussia where they were led by agrarian elites. Again, Sweden is more Prussian than assumed in the literature.<sup>41</sup>

The two most important issues for the farmers and the Country Party were the lowering of taxes and the farmers' costs for supplying soldiers to the army; both taxation and the cost of soldiers lay disproportionately on the farmer class.<sup>42</sup> Under the tutelage of Posse and Key, the bulk of the farmers grew more conservative compared to the role they had played up to the 1865-66 representation reform. After the reform, the pro-democratic impulses of the

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<sup>40</sup> Rune Bokholm, *Kungen av Skåne: En bok om statsmannen Arvid Posse* (Lund, 1998), 144–7.

<sup>41</sup> Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, referring to S.M. Lipset and Stein Rokkan 'Cleavage Structures, Party Systems, and Voter Alignments: An Introduction', in Lipset and Rokkan (eds.), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* (New York, 1967). Agrarian interests and parties are given prominent roles in the creation of the welfare state in influential research such as Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State 1875-1975* (Cambridge, 1990) and Asbjørn Sonne Nørgaard, 'Party Politics and the Organization of the Danish Welfare State, 1890–1920: The Bourgeois Roots of the Modern Welfare State', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 23 (2000). With this in mind, the peculiar role of the Swedish agrarian party is puzzling and worthy of further investigation.

<sup>42</sup> Edvard Thermanius, *Lantmannapartiet: Dess uppkomst, organisation och tidigare utveckling* (Uppsala, 1928); Hultqvist, *Försvar och skatter*.

farmers faded out over the 1870s and 1880s, and the first powerful democratization movement came only in the 1890s with the Socialist and Liberal suffrage movement which had very little to do with the farmers. The initiative had by now moved from the farmers, who instead aligned with the estate owners in a conservative alliance.<sup>43</sup> While the farmers' parties in Denmark and Norway became the liberal parties, in Sweden, the Country Party in 1904 merged with other parties into the Conservative party.<sup>44</sup> That the Swedish agrarian party pre-1904 was less of a democratic force than one might expect is of course in itself related to the limited suffrage discussed in relation to Table 1 above; the farmers in parliament belonged to the élite within their class.<sup>45</sup>

*Was there a continuity between farmers and the labour movement?*

Swedish Sonderweg analyses tend to see a continuity from farmer politics to liberal democracy and the Social Democratic welfare state. Did, then, the political representation of the farmers mean that the state was lenient towards the nascent labour movement? This is questionable. The labour regime was repressive, as discussed in part III, and there is no evidence that the political presence of farmers increased understanding towards the labour movement, unlike Finland, where such an argument has been made.<sup>46</sup> The Swedish state certainly used less violence against the union movement than did its US counterpart<sup>47</sup>, but it was not particularly amicable towards

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<sup>43</sup> On the increasing conservatism of the farmers see Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst?*, 159, 174, 178 on the suffrage question, and Sten Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen* (Stockholm, 1953) for a comprehensive treatment. On the suffrage movement and its character see Torbjörn Vallinder, *I kamp för demokratin. Rösträttsrörelsen i Sverige 1866-1902* (Stockholm, 1962), 248, 274.

<sup>44</sup> Rustow, *The Politics of Compromise*, 41.

<sup>45</sup> As is shown in new empirical research by myself and Mats Olsson. We show that the wealth of farmer parliamentarians was about 4 times larger than that of average farmers, and in the 1890s even 9-10 times larger. Bengtsson and Olsson, 'Peasant Aristocrats? Inequality between Peasant Parliamentarians and their Voters in Sweden, 1769-1895', paper presented at the European Social Science History Conference, Belfast, 4-7 April 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Henrik Stenius 'The Breakthrough of the Principle of Mass Organization in Finland', *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 5 (1980). Cf. Risto Alapuro, *State and Revolution in Finland* (Berkeley, 1988), 101-2, 105-7.

<sup>47</sup> Svante Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden: ett perspektiv på Sveriges 1900-tal* (Stockholm, 2008), uses a Swedish-US comparison to make the argument that the Swedish state early on was friendly to the labour movement. However, in comparison, to the US, as Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton, 2008), makes clear, any West European state would seem labour-friendly c. 1900.

it either, as witnessed for example by the use of vagrancy laws to sentence the 1879 Sundsvall strikers to forced labour, or the 1906 Mackmyra conflict where the former prime minister Christian Lundberg, who was the CEO of the afflicted company fired all workers who had joined a union and, in the middle of the winter, evicted them and their families from their company housing. The state also took action against the unions for example with the 1899 law (*Åkarpslagen*) which instated that it was illegal to try to stop strike-breakers; in fact, the law even made it illegal for striking workers to speak to the strike-breakers.<sup>48</sup> Again Sweden, compared to Finland, appears as the less ‘Nordic’ country: less egalitarian, more conflict-ridden.

### *Emigration*

Economic inequality drastically worsened during the nineteenth century (Figure 2), and it should be noted that this increase coincided with a major process with equalizing implications: the emigration, between 1870 and 1910, of about one million Swedes, about one fifth of the population, especially to the United States. This massive exit of people who were typically young and participating in the labour force, boosted wages as well as the bargaining position of workers more generally.<sup>49</sup> That inequality grew despite the equalizing effect of induced labour scarcity gives an indicator of how entrenched inequality was during this period. The massive emigration, furthermore, was seen by policy-makers as a large problem, and become an impetus for social reforms: to convince Swedes to stay in their country, life would have to be better. In Sweden, the emigration problem was a central part of the ‘social question’.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ragnar Casparsson, *LO: Bakgrund, utveckling, verksamhet* (Stockholm, 1966). Mackmyra: 88–92. Åkarpslagen: 149.

<sup>49</sup> Jonas Ljungberg, ‘The Impact of the Great Emigration on the Swedish Economy’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 45 (1997); Mounir Karadja and Erik Prawitz, ‘Exit, Voice and Political Change: Evidence from Swedish Mass Migration to the United States’, forthcoming in *Journal of Political Economy*.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Bo Stråth, *Sveriges historia 1830–1920* (Stockholm, 2012), 292–309. On the ‘social question’ in Sweden see Per Wisselgren, *Samhällets kartläggare: Lorénska stiftelsen, den sociala frågan och samhällsvetenskapens formering 1830–1920* (Stockholm/Stehag, 2000), especially 31 – 35.

## V. The counter-hegemony and the transition, c. 1870–1950

The exceptional equality of Swedish economy and society c. 1920–1990 did not arrive as the logical conclusion of a long historical continuity; *pace* Berggren and Trägårdh, equality is not the ‘fate’ of the Swedes. The logical question is then: what caused the twentieth century equality? Economic inequality was only reduced after 1920 (cf. Figures 1 and 2). Two mechanisms are stressed in the empirical literature: redistributive taxation, and the fall in capital incomes.<sup>51</sup> The fall in capital incomes after 1920 is related to an increase in regulation after the First World War, as stressed by Piketty, as well as the strengthening of unions after 1920.<sup>52</sup> The emergence of redistributive taxation and the build-up of the welfare state depended, as stressed by the power resources school, upon the unique strength of the Swedish labour movement.<sup>53</sup> We must then understand why the unions and the labour movement more generally were so strong in Sweden.

Madeleine Hurd’s comparison of German and Swedish political-economic development c. 1870–1930 provides an important part of the puzzle. Against the traditional interpretation of Germany as traditionally authoritarian and Swedish as structurally democratic and egalitarian, she points out that suffrage was more limited in Sweden than in Prussia before World War One (cf. Table 1). Paradoxically but importantly, the very lack of democracy in Sweden would through its effect on social coalitions foster a thorough democratization. The exclusion of such a large part of the population from formal national politics meant that the petit bourgeoisie, lower middle class and working class united in a suffrage reform movement, while in Germany, the greater inclusion of lower middle class men in formal politics meant that middle class liberals and *haute bourgeoisie* market liberals could unite around a program of

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<sup>51</sup> Roine and Waldenström, ‘Evolution of Top Incomes’.

<sup>52</sup> War and regulation: Piketty, *Capital*. Trade unions: Erik Bengtsson, ‘Labour’s Share in Twentieth-century Sweden: A Reinterpretation’, *Scandinavian Economic History Review*, 62 (2014).

<sup>53</sup> Walter Korpi, *The Democratic Class Struggle* (London, 1983); Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *Politics against Markets: The Social Democratic Road to Power* (Princeton, 1985).

economic liberalism without democracy, *against* the working class.<sup>54</sup> The broad ‘small-folk’ (*småfolk*) alliance in Sweden put the country on a democratic and egalitarian rather than authoritarian route. Hurd points to the Socialist-Liberal alliance in Stockholm in the 1890s and early 1900s as much stronger than in Germany and shows that there was some cultural convergence among labour leaders, to a petit-bourgeois pattern. They were schooled in the small-folk alliance to speak (and write) more formally, to dress more middle class, and so on. This approach to bourgeois culture might have lost the worker ‘some cultural freedom, but it gained him social power’, as political participation in the elitist system at the time was seen as more legitimate if one’s behaviour was bourgeois.<sup>55</sup>

Hurd’s powerful investigation sheds important light on Sweden in several respects. A common view is that Lib-Labism and Liberal influence over workers was particularly strong in Britain, which industrialized before Socialism had taken root in the country, and thus got a strong Liberal current in its working class, with many workers voting for the Liberals until the party system realignment in the 1920s. This has been seen by observers such as Perry Anderson as a cause of a weaker Socialist labour movement in Britain than in the late industrializer Germany. However, in the light of Hurd’s investigation, we might want to modify this conclusion. In Swedish civil society under the politically very exclusive oligarchy which reigned, Liberal reformers and Social Democrats consorted in a manner more akin to Britain than to Germany.<sup>56</sup> Rather than diluting the effectiveness of the Social Democratic labour movement, it seems to have delivered it a strong position to reform society, as we will see.

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<sup>54</sup> In historical institutionalist parlance, this could be called a sequencing argument. Cf. Kathleen Thelen, ‘Historical Institutionalism in Comparative Politics’, *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2 (1999), 389.

<sup>55</sup> Madeleine Hurd, *Public Spheres, Public Mores, and Democracy: Hamburg and Stockholm, 1870–1914* (Ann Arbor, 2000). Small-folk alliance: 270. Socialist-liberal alliance: 235.

<sup>56</sup> Sheri Berman, ‘Path Dependency and Political Action: Re-examining Responses to the Depression’, *Comparative Politics*, 30 (1998), 381–2.

*The popular movements, c. 1870-1914*

Around 1900, one third of Swedes were members of the unions, the teetotaling movement and/or the free churches.<sup>57</sup> While the political relevance of teetotaling and free churches might not be very clear<sup>58</sup>, under the very exclusive and political system in Sweden, the teetotallers and even the free churches provided an organizational infrastructure which strengthened the nascent labour movement. When the labour movement needed organization skills and meeting places, they could cooperate with the two popular movements that were already present. The teetotaling movement which spread in the mid-nineteenth century attracted members especially from society's lower strata and not the least among women. Their members were to a very large extent excluded from official politics and general suffrage thus became a central demand for the movement, not the least with the aim to pursue the issue of Prohibition in parliament.<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, the movement worked as a 'citizen school' for lower class people who learnt political organizing and activism in this context. Cross-organizing with the labour movement became common; in the 1910s, 84 per cent of Social Democratic MPs were teetotallers, and among the new Left Socialist Party's MPs in 1917, all were.<sup>60</sup>

As Rueschemeyer et al. argued, 'it is the growth of a counter-hegemony of subordinate classes and especially the working class – developed and sustained by the organization and growth of trade unions, working-class parties and similar groups – that is critical for the promotion of democracy.' They pointed to Scandinavia as an example of that class organization and creation of a counter-hegemony can 'change the balance of class power

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<sup>57</sup> Sven Lundkvist, *Folkrorelserna i det svenska samhället 1850-1920* (Stockholm, 1977).

<sup>58</sup> Although the connection between non-conformist religion and Liberal politics is well known in the English case; i.e. D.W. Bebbington, 'Nonconformity and Electoral Sociology, 1867-1918', *The Historical Journal*, 27 (1984).

<sup>59</sup> Sven Lundkvist, *Politik, nykterhet och reformer: En studie i folkrorelsernas politiska verksamhet 1900-1920* (Uppsala, 1974), 36–45. See also Göran Therborn, "'Pillarization" and "Popular Movements": Two Variants of Welfare State Capitalism: the Netherlands and Sweden' in Francis G. Castles (ed.) *The Comparative History of Public Policy* (Cambridge, 1989), 198. As Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens and Stephens, *Capitalist Development*, 94, point out, the free churches' opposition to the State Church in Sweden and the Church of England played very similar roles in Swedish and English society. It would also be interesting to compare Swedish and Dutch popular mobilization; Therborn provides a sketch of such a comparison.

<sup>60</sup> Lundkvist, *Folkrorelserna i det svenska samhället*. 'Citizen school': 203–212. MP:s: 175–7.

in society'.<sup>61</sup> The popular movements could mobilize large sections of Swedish society. The temperance movement collected in 1909 1.9 million signatures for prohibition<sup>62</sup>, which is quite impressive in a country with 5.5 million inhabitants. While the suffrage movement were small in terms of members, at times it could mobilize greatly. So in 1893 for the 'people's parliament', the alternative, unofficial parliament organized by the movement, 149 856 persons voted for the different Liberal and Social Democratic candidates. This meant that the unofficial parliament had 50 per cent more voters than the actual parliament in the elections to the second chamber that year. Further, the suffrage movement's petition for general suffrage in 1897 attracted 363 638 signatures, of which only 65 879 had the right to vote to parliament.<sup>63</sup> While official parliamentary politics in this period was stale and conservative and voter turnout was low (see part IV), the extra parliamentary popular movements were dynamic and growing.

German Social Democracy after the lifting of the Anti-Socialist laws in 1890 is the model of a strong, counter-hegemonic labour movement. Lidtke in his study of the German labour movement subculture described 'an environment of clubs, activities, and relationships permeated with socialist political assumptions and implications, and this applied even to labor movement associations that officially denied all political purpose'.<sup>64</sup> The development of such a counter-hegemonic subculture in Sweden was different, in the intermingling of middle class and working class, liberals and socialists, in the popular movements, but eventually an even stronger labour movement subculture emerged. Swedish working class associational culture might have been less distinctively proletarian and less beer-soaked than the German one, but it was very strong in the numbers it mobilized and the working-class consciousness that it bred.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens and Stephens, *Capitalist Development and Democracy*, 50, 274.

<sup>62</sup> Lundkvist, *Politik, nykterhet och reformer*, 44–45.

<sup>63</sup> Vallinder, *I kamp för demokratin*, 90, 202.

<sup>64</sup> Vernon D. Lidtke, (1985), *The Alternative Culture: Socialist Labor in Imperial Germany* (Oxford, 1985), 17.

<sup>65</sup> On the centrality of the tavern in the German labour movement culture, see Lidtke, *Alternative Culture*; James S. Roberts, 'Drink and the Labour Movement: The Schnaps Boycott of 1909', in Richard Evans (ed.), *The German Working Class 1888-1933: The Politics of Everyday Life* (London, 1982).

When Hurd dismisses working-class associational culture in Sweden as ‘weak’, this is in my view because she treats the German case too much as a role model.<sup>66</sup> When studying the Swedish working class subculture on its own terms, it becomes more impressive.

*The strength of the labour movement*

Table 2 shows some key indicators of labour movement organization and working class cohesion. Unlike the inequality figures in Figure 1 and the suffrage statistics in Table 1, this is a field where Sweden at the end of the *ancien regime* actually stands out.

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<sup>66</sup> Hurd, *Public Spheres*, 218.

**Table 2. Working-class organization, c. 1910**

	Working-class party vote share, last election before 1914	Party members per 1000 inhabitants	Number of male workers per working-class newspaper	Union density
Denmark	30	26.2	3.5	20
Norway	32	24.0	4.2	14
Sweden	36	26.0	4.9	13
Germany	35	19.4	9.0	17
Belgium	30	n.a.	9.0	11
Switzerland	10	8.4	13.0	10
Netherlands	19	4.6	39.0	16
France	17	2.5	53.3	4
Italy	23	1.5	67.8	n.a.
United Kingdom	6	n.a.	214	27

Note. Sources: voting and newspaper data from Gregory Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe* (Oxford, 1991), 167, 188. Since Luebbert does not report the German vote share, it (for the 1912 election) is fetched from wikipedia: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\\_Democratic\\_Party\\_of\\_Germany](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Democratic_Party_of_Germany). Union density from Colin Crouch, *Industrial Relations and European State Traditions* (Oxford, 1993), 114–122. Peak pre-1914 party membership from Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford, 2002), table 4.2, p. 66. Divided by country's population in 1900 from [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_population\\_in\\_1900](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_population_in_1900).

The Swedish Social Democrats, formed in 1889 and shaped early on ideologically by the German Marxist tradition, were a very strong electoral force already before World War One. With 36 per cent of the votes in 1911, even with restricted suffrage, it had the highest vote share among the nine countries in the table. The Swedish party along with its Nordic colleagues also was the strongest in terms of party membership as a share of the population. The German SPD

is famous as a mass party but with its 19 party members per 1000 inhabitants in 1910, it was outdistanced by the Swedish SAP with its 26 members per 1000 inhabitants. Likewise, union organization was extensive, even though the Swedish figure in Table 2 is depressed by the loss in the general strike in 1909. From the low point of 13 per cent in 1910, union density among workers increased to 31 per cent in 1920; before the loss in the general strike, it had been 26 per cent in 1908.<sup>67</sup> A more exotic metric but very important to the argument, is the sales of working class newspapers per capita. In Denmark, Norway and Sweden for every 5 to 9 male workers, one labour newspaper was sold. This means that Scandinavians to a much higher degree than other Europeans got their news from labour movement intellectuals.<sup>68</sup> Party newspapers played an important role in the working-class subculture and movement. They tended to be distributed in cafés, clubs and bars, and thus reached a greater readership than that implied by the subscriber statistics, they provided a career ladder for movement cadres, and a vehicle for the party leadership to disseminate their policies.<sup>69</sup> The strength of the labour press is indicative of something much larger, which is the strength of the working-class subculture in Scandinavia. Historical research on this topic has to some degree focused on more purely cultural expressions such as drinking, or on the degree of rowdiness versus orderliness among workers.<sup>70</sup> My point is something different. The Swedish working class at the beginning of the twentieth century was poor and disenfranchised and lived and worked in a deeply unequal economy, but they were exceptionally organized.

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<sup>67</sup> Anders Kjellberg, *Facklig organisering i tolv länder* (Lund, 1983).

<sup>68</sup> John D. Stephens, 'Class Formation and Class Consciousness: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis with Reference to Britain and Sweden', *British Journal of Sociology*, 30 (1979), 407–408, compares the frequency of reading labour movement-sympathizing newspapers in the British and the Swedish working class in the 1970s, and finds that Swedes indeed were much more likely to read a Socialist-friendly newspaper. This led according to Stephens to stronger class consciousness in Sweden.

<sup>69</sup> Distribution: Eley, *Forging Democracy*, 44. Career ladder: Petra Pauli, *Rörelsens ledare: Karriärvägar och ledarideal I den svenska arbetarrörelsen under 1900-talet* (Gothenburg, 2012), 54–6. Party leaders: Kjell Östberg, *Byråkrati och reformism: En studie av svensk socialdemokratiska politiska och sociala integrering fram till första världskriget* (Lund, 1990).

<sup>70</sup> Orderliness: Ronny Ambjörnsson, *Den skötsamme arbetaren: idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sågverkssamhälle 1880–1930* (Stockholm, 1988). Rowdiness: Lars Magnusson, *Den bråkiga kulturen: förläggare och smideshantverkare i Eskilstuna 1800–1850* (Stockholm, 1988).

### *The labour movement counter-hegemony*

The traditional measure of labour movement strength (not the least in the power resources tradition) is electoral success and the degree of organization in trade unions. But as Jenny Jansson points out, organization numbers are not everything. The cohesiveness of the organization is almost equally important: to achieve something, the party or the union needs to be able to agree on goals. Jansson, who studies the activities of the Workers' Educational Association, stresses the importance of workers' education for the creation of a cohesive reformist working class consciousness in Sweden after the Russian Revolution and until the late 1930s.<sup>71</sup>

My argument here is related, but more general. The width and depth of working-class organization in Sweden in 1910 (or in 1950, for that matter) was unparalleled. The trade unions as stressed by Korpi were important, the Social Democratic Party's successful alliance with the Farmers' League as stressed by Esping-Andersen was important, and the workers' education as stressed by Jansson was important.<sup>72</sup> But the cumulative effect of it all was important in a way that I believe has not been argued in the previous literature. The total outcome of the exceptional organizational strength of the Swedish labour movement was a working class with an exceptional degree of organization as well as ideological cohesion.

### *Class consciousness*

There are no survey studies of class consciousness in the first half of the twentieth century; the Swedish National Election Survey started in 1954. However, Särilvik pointed out the social bases of Swedish parties were stable from the 1920s to the 1950s. The party landscape was

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<sup>71</sup> Jenny Jansson, *Manufacturing Consensus: The Making of the Swedish Reformist Working Class* (Uppsala, 2012).

<sup>72</sup> Korpi, *Democratic Class Struggle*; Esping-Andersen, *Politics against Markets*; Jansson, *Manufacturing Consensus*.

organized in two blocs: on the Left the giant Social Democratic Party and the small Communist Party, on the centre-right the Farmers' League, the Liberals and the Conservatives. While voters of the three centre-right parties had quite weak party affiliations and flowed between the three parties without too much afterthought, this was not the case on the Left. The Social Democrats in the 1950s and 1960s had a remarkably high share of voters who were 'convinced adherents' of the party.<sup>73</sup> In 1968, when the Social Democrats won a parliamentary majority, 51 per cent of their voters 'strongly identified' with the party, and another 25 per cent 'weakly identified'; 18 per cent said that they only had a preference for the party, without identification. Older voters were especially likely to strongly identify with the party.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore, in terms of party members' share of the electorate, Sweden was with 23-24 per cent from the 1950s (when the statistics begin) to the 1980s along with Austria the most highly organized country, due to the Social Democrats and the farmers.<sup>75</sup>

The earliest survey of class consciousness in Sweden was made in the industrial city Katrineholm in 1948. Then, 80 per cent of manual workers and 50 per cent of white collar workers considered themselves to be working class. Furthermore, a majority of the inhabitants, when asked which class was in power in Swedish society, replied the working class. When the study was replicated in post-industrial Katrineholm in the 1980s, the results were different: fewer identified as working class, and they did not believe that the working class was in power. The analysts concluded that: 'The identification with a movement in the process of conquering power has been replaced with the feeling of having left power to an elite'.<sup>76</sup> Günther Roth in his study of German workers' auto-biographies claims that vulgar Marxism had a special appeal

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<sup>73</sup> Bo Särilvik, 'Voting Behavior in Shifting Election Winds', *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 5, (1970). Party system: 254. Social Democrats: 256–262.

<sup>74</sup> Own calculations with data from the SNES, Swedish National Election Studies Program. Data available from <https://snd.gu.se/sv/catalogue/series/2>. The project which produces the data is <http://valforskning.pol.gu.se/english>

<sup>75</sup> Susan Scarrow, 'Parties Without Members? Party Organization in a Changing Electoral Environment', in Russell J. Dalton and Martin P. Wattenberg (eds.), *Parties Without Partisans: Political Change in Advanced Industrial Democracies* (Oxford, 2002), Table 5.2.

<sup>76</sup> Maktutredningen (1990) *Demokrati och makt i Sverige: Maktutredningens huvudrapport*. SOU 1990:44 (Stockholm, 1990), 36.

among rather passive grass-roots members of the movement who could profess belief in the power of Social Democracy and its leaders, with no special need for their own activism.<sup>77</sup> In the Swedish context, the party leader of the 1930s and 1940s Per Albin Hansson had a similar view. Hansson studied the social groups tables produced by Statistics Sweden which showed the rapid growth of social group III, roughly the working class and the strongest basis of Social Democratic support, with a firm belief that this the growth of the lower classes itself guaranteed a future Social Democratic majority.<sup>78</sup> A view which may seem irrational now but which made more sense in the 1930s and 1940s, when the support for and belief in Social Democracy was firmly entrenched in the everyday life of the Swedish working class.

The immense organizational drive which marked Sweden from the 1870s to the 1920s changed the political ecology of the country durably. When the political sociologist Rydgren at the turn of the millennium wanted to explain why Sweden then still had no successful extreme right party, he invoked the factor ‘enduring class loyalties’. While the working class often can be recruited to extreme right parties – as has to some degree happened in Sweden since Rydgren wrote his article –, in 2002 one could still point to the high degree of class voting and union membership as an obstacle to far-right expansion within the working class.<sup>79</sup> Around 1990, as the public Power Investigation noted, the belief that the working class was the majority of the country and ruled the country had eroded. But in hindsight, what is remarkable is not that the working-class counter-hegemony decayed in the 1980s and 1990s, but that it lasted so long.

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<sup>77</sup> Guenter Roth, *The Social Democrats in Imperial Germany: A Study in Working-Class Isolation and National Integration* (Totowa, 1963), 199.

<sup>78</sup> Anders Isaksson, *Per Albin, IV: Landsfadern* (Stockholm, 2000), 48, 73, 106.

<sup>79</sup> Jens Rydgren, ‘Radical Right Populism in Sweden: Still a Failure, But for How Long?’, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 27 (2002). When Rydgren in 2018 revisited the 2002 article, he argued that it was precisely the declining class consciousness and adherence to Social Democracy of the working class, and the decreasing Left-Right divide on economic and social policy, which opened up for the radical right in the years since 2002. Jens Rydgren and Sara van der Meiden, ‘The Radical Right and the End of Swedish Exceptionalism’, *European Political Science* (2018), published online 2 May 2018.

### *The role of ideology*

In some analyses, ideological flexibility is seen as a key determinant of the success of the Swedish Social Democrats. Berman argues that compared to the German SPD which was hampered by dogmatic adherence to Marxism when facing the economic crises of the 1920s and 1930s, the SAP was more flexible and pursued a constructive policy.<sup>80</sup> This is a relevant point, but that the SAP pursued an expansionist jobs policy in the 1930s may equally well be related to the similar policy pursued in working-class dominated municipalities already in the 1920s, where the policy was reached at because of the material interest of the unemployed party and trade union members, rather than from a reading of economic theory. Furthermore, empirical studies of the SAP's policy-making have shown a great deal of improvisation and shifting ideological motivation.<sup>81</sup> Generally, the ideological complexion of the SAP was not that different from other European Social Democratic parties, with a combination of Kautskyan Marxism, English guild socialism, liberal reformism, German *Kathedersozialismus*, and Bernsteinian revisionism.<sup>82</sup> It was not any originality in the field of the ideas which allowed the SAP to come further than other Social Democratic parties, but its solid popularity in the lower classes, which allowed the SAP to enjoy many years in government (most notably, continuously from 1932 to 1976), and to improvise egalitarian policies based on the shifting realities of twentieth century Sweden, as well as ideological trends.

### *The road to the alliance between farmers and workers*

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<sup>80</sup> Berman, 'Path Dependency and Political Action'.

<sup>81</sup> 1920s: Rebecca Svensson, *När järnarbetare hanterar spaden och målaren knacker makadam: Om arbetslöshetspolitik i en arbetarstyrd kommun, Västerås, under 1920-talets krisår* (Uppsala, 2004) and Nils Unga, *Socialdemokratin och arbetslöshetsfrågan 1912–34: Framväxten av den 'nya' arbetslöshetspolitiken* (Lund, 1976). Improvisation: Bo Stråth, *Mellan två fonder: LO och den svenska modellen* (Stockholm, 1998). Shifting motivation: Jenny Andersson, *Mellan tillväxt och trygghet: idéer om produktiv socialpolitik i socialdemokratisk socialpolitisk ideologi under efterkrigstiden* (Uppsala, 2003).

<sup>82</sup> Kautskyan Marxism: Leif Lewin, *Planhushållningsdebatten* (Stockholm, 1967). Liberal reformism: Herbert Tingsten, *Den svenska socialdemokratiens idéutveckling* (Stockholm, 1941). *Kathedersozialismus*: Sten O. Karlsson, *Det intelligenta samhället: En omtolkning av socialdemokratiens idéhistoria* (Stockholm, 2001).

In political economy analyses such as Korpi, Esping-Andersen and Luebbert, the alliance between the Social Democrats and the Farmers' League in the 1930s is seen as key to the rise of Social Democratic hegemony.<sup>83</sup> In relation to the possible continuity from farmers to workers in the Swedish Sonderweg thesis, it is worth revisiting the famous 'cow trade' of 1932 that started the 44-year period of uninterrupted Social Democratic government.<sup>84</sup>

The 1920s, the first decade with universal suffrage, was chaotic in matters of government. During the decade, Sweden had ten different governments (Liberals, Social Democrats, Conservatives as well as a-political bureaucrats). By the late 1920s, it was clear that a greater degree of political stability was desirable. The Social Democrats, it seemed, would need a coalition partner to last longer than the six to twenty months that their three governments in the 1920s had lasted. Party leader Per Albin Hansson observed that in Denmark, the Social Democrats governed from 1929 with the small radical liberal party *Radikale Venstre*. In 1932, the SAP performed very well in the election, increasing from 90 to 104 mandates in the second chamber, with the Conservatives decreasing from 73 to 58, the Liberals also shrinking (from

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<sup>83</sup> Korpi, *Democratic Class Struggle*; Esping-Andersen, *Politics against Markets*; Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism or Social Democracy*.

<sup>84</sup> It may be seen as a pre-condition of the alliance that the reformist labour movement, i.e. the Social Democrats, were dominant versus the Communist Party, which indeed they were. The CP (explicitly Communist from 1921 to 1990) never got more than 10.3 per cent of the votes, obtained in 1944 as the Soviet military victories against Nazi Germany gave Communism increased prestige. The root cause for the lack of grounding for Swedish communism is the early dominance of the Social Democrats due to the organizational strength established as discussed above. This did not leave much room to the left on the political arena. The Social Democrats were a big tent with a lively left within the party, and at the same time the party vigorously fought the Communists (within the trade unions, renters' organization and on other fronts), both with clean and dirty methods. For the importance of anti-communist campaigns within the trade unions in the late 1920s and early 1930s, see Tom Olsson, *Pappersmassestrejken 1932: En studie av facklig ledning och opposition* (Lund, 1980) and Bengt Schüllerqvist, *Från kosackval till kohandel: SAP:s väg till makten 1928–1933* (Stockholm, 1992). On Social Democratic dominance, see Torsten Svensson, *Socialdemokratins dominans: en studie av den svenska socialdemokratins partistrategi* (Uppsala, 1994). On anti-communism more generally, see Thomas Kanger and Jonas Gummesson, *Kommunistjägarna: socialdemokraternas politiska spioneri mot svenska folket* (Stockholm, 1990). On the manufacturing of a reformist class-consciousness, see Jansson, *Manufacturing Consensus*. For an insightful and sympathetic analysis of the Communists' double-bind as a junior, completely subordinate partner to the Social Democrats on the domestic arena and the Soviets on the external arena during the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, and the attempts to get out of this bind in the 1960s, see Werner Schmidt's biography of the 1964-1975 party leader, *C.H. Hermansson: en politisk biografi* (Stockholm 2005).

28 to 20), while the Farmers' League grew from 27 to 36.<sup>85</sup> When Hansson and the SAP leadership surveyed possible coalition partners, they could observe that the Danish colleagues by now had shifted to an alliance with the farmer-dominated liberal *Venstre* party. The SAP leadership worried about the possible attractions to fascism within the Farmers' League, however. The Social Democratic finance minister Sköld and his wife were given the task to invite top farmer politicians for dinner at the Skölds' house, and discreetly gather information on their possible fascist sympathies. What they found was that while the farmers were very pro-eugenics, they did not sympathize with Nazism. The SAP could then negotiate with the farmers as well as the Conservatives and the Liberals about the formation of a coalition government. The Conservatives and the Liberals declined, and the SAP ended up with a complete and within the party rather controversial surrender to the farmers on agricultural policy, to get a functioning coalition.<sup>86</sup> After steep declines in the prices of agricultural products in connection to the Great Depression, the Farmers' League was ideologically flexible and pragmatic: for very generous state price guarantees to the farmers, they were willing to collaborate with Social Democrats.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, a faction of one of the two Liberal parties also voted for the new economic policy, giving some support to the Social Democratic leadership's original hunch that a Lib-Lab coalition might be the way forward.<sup>88</sup>

Previous research by Korpi, Esping-Andersen, Luebbert and others is completely right in emphasizing the 1932 coalition between the farmers' party and the Social Democrats as a massively important factor for the unique influence of the Social Democrats in Sweden.

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<sup>85</sup> It should be noted that the Farmers' League (*Bondeförbundet*) was formed in 1914; the previous Country Party (*Lantmannapartiet*) was dissolved in 1904 when it coalesced with other conservative forces into the Conservative Party (*Allmänna Valmansförbundet*).

<sup>86</sup> Isaksson, *Per Albin IV*, 128, 202, 239–245. For the agrarian crisis as a background, see Mats Morell, *Jordbruket i industrisamhället* (Stockholm, 2001), 157–179.

<sup>87</sup> For the process, and its continuation during the 1930s and 1940s, from a Farmers' League perspective, see Reine Rydén, *"Att åka snålskjuts är icke hederligt": De svenska jordbrukarnas organisationsprocess 1880-1947* (Gothenburg, 1998), ch. 9. Rydén, 207, discusses also among other things the fear of Per Albin Hansson that Swedish farmers would turn to Fascism if the agrarian crisis was not counteracted by state subsidies. Cf. the situation in Norway: Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem*, 401–402.

<sup>88</sup> Schüllerqvist, *Från kosackval till kohandel*, 15.

But it is imperative not to interpret this coalition as a logical or unavoidable outcome of a long continuity of friendly farmer-worker relations. On the contrary, when in 1914 30 000 farmers marched the streets of Stockholm in support of the King's power and against parliamentary democracy, the labour movement countered with a 100 000 strong march the next day, with the opposite message.<sup>89</sup> There was no long tradition of farmer-worker alliances in Sweden and the farmers' party was not the first choice coalition partner for the SAP in 1932-33; the liberals were.

### *The take-over of the state*

When the Social Democrats were in government after 1932, they knew that the bureaucracy was staffed by people who did not sympathize with their policy aims. They understood, stressed Rothstein in his book on the 'Social Democratic state', that they had to people the bureaucracy with new cadres, sympathetic to the new policies, to be able to implement them effectively.<sup>90</sup> Rothstein compared the success of Social Democrats in steering actual policy in two fields: labour market policy and education policy, and showed that the labour market board was full of Social Democratic cadres and steered with Social Democratic goals in mind, while the schooling board was less committed to equality. Rothstein claimed that this difference led to a more successful – from a Social Democratic point of view – policy on the labour market policy area.

An important precondition of why the Social Democrats could re-focus the bureaucracy was the strong educational wing of the labour movement. Another probable cause of this successful cadre bureaucracy project was that Sweden even in its reactionary guise in the late nineteenth century had relatively high levels of literacy and numeracy. This is one field

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<sup>89</sup> Lindblad, *Karl Staaff*, 13–15, 18–22.

<sup>90</sup> Bo Rothstein, *Den socialdemokratiska staten: reformer och förvaltning inom svensk arbetsmarknads- och skolpolitik* (Lund, 1986).

where we can indeed hint a historical Swedish *Sonderweg*: considering how backward the economy was in 1800 or 1750, literacy was remarkably widespread.<sup>91</sup> The legacy of popular education probably facilitated the growth of popular movements and their competence after 1870, and thus indirectly influenced the egalitarian turn of Sweden in the twentieth century. Furthermore, the relative closeness between intellectual liberals and the labour movement in the early twentieth century, under the very exclusive political regime which was in place then, probably gave a lasting legacy of easier recruitment of left-liberal intellectuals to steer the Social Democratic state. The strength of the Social Democratic cadres meant that they could build an advanced welfare state with ambitious redistributive aims. Thus, together with the exceptional strength of the trade unions, the foundations for a new equality were put in place after the 1920s.<sup>92</sup> Along with literacy levels high for the level of economic development of the country, another historical legacy in Sweden was that of an efficient state. That the Swedish state was relatively competent and powerful internally already in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was argued by Tilly, and has found support in later historical research.<sup>93</sup> In Hecló's state-centred account, this is key to the growth of the ambitious Swedish welfare state in the twentieth century. However, as Premfors points out, the competent bureaucrats of the old regime did not want democratization – on the contrary, this was enforced on them.<sup>94</sup> Nevertheless, the competence of the state facilitated ambitious Social Democratic policies as well, once democracy was in place in 1921.

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<sup>91</sup> Lars G. Sandberg, 'The Case of the Impoverished Sophisticate: Human Capital and Swedish Economic Growth before World War I', *Journal of Economic History*, 39 (1979).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Kjell Östberg, *Kommunerna och den svenska modellen: Socialdemokratien och kommunalpolitiken fram till Andra världskriget* (Stockholm and Stehag, 1996), 255–7, on the importance of the cadre for political power.

<sup>93</sup> Mats Hallenberg, *Kungen, fogdarna och riket: Lokalförvaltning och statsbyggande under tidig Vasatid* (Stockholm and Stehag, 2001).

<sup>94</sup> Hugh Hecló, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden. From Relief to Income Maintenance* (New Haven, 1974); Rune Premfors, 'Democratization in Scandinavia: The Case of Sweden', *Score Rapportserie 2003:8* (Stockholm, 2003).

## VI. Concluding reflections

In Swedish history, there was no simple continuity from any peasant farmer egalitarianism to a Social Democratic one. On the contrary, from circa 1920 to 1980, Sweden experienced a rapid transition, which built on the popular mobilization of the previous decades. This contradicts the Swedish *Sonderweg* thesis in all its versions – the peasant-focused Moorian approach, the cultural version, and the political culture version. The roots of modern Swedish egalitarianism were the huge organizational drive of the ‘popular movements’ in the decades after 1870. This counter-hegemony achieved through union and political activity equalization of votes, incomes, and wealth. In this way, the essay supports the institutional approach to understand the determinants of economic inequality. Politics is, as Hacker and Pierson say, organized combat and the Swedish working class was the most well-organized in the world; this meant that Sweden became the most Social Democratic country in the world.<sup>95</sup>

Swedish history is more tumultuous and more interesting than conventional accounts would have us believe. The present essay has shown several deficiencies in the received wisdom, and thereby demonstrated the need for further research on several of the issues discussed. Four may be discussed very briefly. One is the political role of the teetotallers and the free churches, and the interaction between religion and politics. It seems that while both these movements played an important role in Swedish democratization, especially the free churches’ political energy was quickly exhausted; they set a new politics in motion, but as a result also faded from political prominence.<sup>96</sup> There is also a lack of investigation of the role of the Church of Sweden in the old regime. Despite the fact that the conservative, christian philosopher Sigurd Ribbing and bishop Gottfrid Billing were two of the most important

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<sup>95</sup> Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner-Take-All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—and Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York, 2010). Cf. Korpi, *Democratic Class Struggle*.

<sup>96</sup> Lundkvist, *Politik, nykterhet, och reformer*, 373. In 1964 a Christian Democratic party was founded with a strong basis in the free churches, but the role of this party is very different than the political aspects of free churches discussed here.

Conservative ideologues in Sweden around the turn of the century, and that the Church had a very strong tradition of political representation going back to the pre-1866 estates diet, no comprehensive investigation has been made of the Church's political role c. 1870-1920, and therefore we also lack an analysis of the relationship between the free churches, associated with liberalism, and the Church of Sweden, associated with the conservatives.<sup>97</sup> It would be interesting to draw comparisons, for example, with Britain, where the Conservatives successfully used the banner of the united church to mobilize against the Left, and the free churches seemingly played a similar role to in Sweden, and with the Netherlands, which also had politically important free churches.<sup>98</sup> An investigation of the socio-political dynamic between the free churches and the state church would also open up for investigation the ideological and mentalities aspects of this church split. While historians have investigated whether the free churches encouraged more 'modern' demographic behaviour, reflecting a new mentality<sup>99</sup>, and were harbingers of secularization<sup>99</sup>, the political aspects of the process are less known.

A second issue which calls for more research is the development and shifts of farmer politics. These shifts are under-appreciated in the current literature, which has typically studied one short period at a time.<sup>100</sup> What stands out when one then surveys the literature are

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<sup>97</sup> Ribbing (1816-1899) was professor of philosophy in Uppsala from 1850 and MP 1863-72 and 1875-79. Billing (1841-1925) was professor of theology in Lund from 1881, bishop from 1884, and MP 1889-1906 and 1908-1912. On Ribbing's legitimization of the established order see Hultqvist, *Försvar och skatter*, 181ff; Kilander, *Den nya staten och den gamla*, 67-8; Mellquist, *Rösträtt efter förtjänst?*, 89, 178-181; Nilsson, *Elitens svängrum*, ch. 11. On Billing's role as the most far-right of the King's political advisors during the struggles over parliamentarism in the 1910s, see Olle Nyman, *Högern och kungamakten 1911-1914: Ur borggårdskrisens förhistoria* (Uppsala and Stockholm, 1957), 10-26.

<sup>98</sup> Daniel Ziblatt, *Conservative Parties and the Birth of Democracy* (Cambridge, 2017), 82-104; Bebbington, 'Nonconformity', On the Netherlands see Therborn, "'Pillarization" and "Popular Movements"'.  
<sup>99</sup> Johan Söderberg, *Civilisering, marknad och våld i Sverige 1750-1870: En regional analys* (1993), esp. ch. 6; Arne Jarrick, *Den himmelske älskaren* (Stockholm, 1987).

<sup>100</sup> On the 1840s and 1850s Christensen, *Bönder och herrar*. On 1865-1873 Hultqvist, *Försvar och skatter*. On the 1870s and 1880s Hultqvist, *Riksdagsopinionen och ämbetsmannaintressena*. On the late nineteenth century Thermaenius, *Lantmannapartiet and Carlsson, Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen*. The research literature on the Farmers' League in the 1910s is strikingly weak; Yngve Mohlin, *Bondepartiet och det moderna samhället 1914-1936* (Umeå, 1989) is a mechanically quantitative investigation of electoral support which yields very little understanding of the new party's character and role in Swedish society at the time. The literature on the party and

the discontinuities: from the oppositional politics of the late estates diet to the conservatism of the Country Party, then the ten years without an agrarian party, then a Farmers' League oscillating between the far right and the alliance with Social Democrats. This fractured development deserves a comprehensive treatment, to explain the shifting roles of the farmers in a varying socio-political context.

The third issue to highlight is the reformist alliance between the Liberal intelligentsia and the labour movement. In the final two decades of the nineteenth century an influential Liberal reformist intelligentsia came forward, as has recently been highlighted in a string of powerful studies.<sup>101</sup> This literature has clearly shown the limitations in perspectives on the evolution of the Swedish welfare state which focus only on Social Democracy. However, without the reformist impetus of the labour movement, the philanthropic efforts of the Liberal intelligentsia would have been limited to social liberal islands in an otherwise conservative sea. Therefore, the interaction between the liberals and the labour movement, and the shifting initiatives in reformism, seem like fruitful avenues for further research.<sup>102</sup>

The fourth issue is the political dynamics of lagging Swedish democratization. As Swedish historians have stated, the 1865-66 representation reform was 'society-preserving', but why was it so?<sup>103</sup> Why did it become a road block against further reform, allowing Sweden to become one of the least democratic countries in western Europe, rather than a stepping stone for reformism? Here a promising route forward would be a comparison with the three other Nordic countries, with their quite different roads to democracy.<sup>104</sup>

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the farmers' organizations more generally during the Great Depression is richer: Rydén, "Att åka snålskjuts" and Per Thullberg, *Bönder går samman* (Stockholm, 1977) are two interesting studies.

<sup>101</sup> David Östlund, *Det sociala kriget och kapitalets ansvar: Social ingenjörskonst mellan affärsintresse och samhällsreform i USA och Sverige 1899-1914* (Stockholm, 2003); Henrik Björck, *Folkhemsbyggare* (2008), Wisselgren, *Samhällets kartläggare*.

<sup>102</sup> Of course, this argument is influenced by Hurd, *Public Spheres*. Christer Skoglund, *Vita mössor under röda fanor: Vänsterstudenter, kulturradikalism och bildningsideal i Sverige 1880-1940* (Stockholm, 1991) provides an interesting study of the leftward drift of students and academics from the 1880s to the 1940s.

<sup>103</sup> Nilsson, 'Den samhällsbevarande representationsreformen'.

<sup>104</sup> Kayser Nielsen, *Bonde, stat og hjem*, ch. 5 compares the constitutional evolution of the four Nordic countries in the nineteenth century, but does not advance any explanation of the differences in the pace of reform.

Beyond the historical account put forward here, there is another reason to doubt the Swedish *Sonderweg* thesis. If equality is a long-lasting national trait, built into a deep-seated political culture, perhaps even the ‘fate’ of the Swedish people<sup>105</sup>, then the degree of economic equality should be rather stable over time. The equality which marked the distribution of Swedish incomes and wealth in the third quarter of the twentieth century should, contrary to the argument put forward in this paper, not be threatened just because the Social Democrats and the labour movement more generally have been weakened since the 1980s. In fact, however, the Gini coefficient of Swedish incomes has increased from 21.2 in 1975 and 19.8 in 1981, the lowest point, to 28.1 in 2014, the latest available year. Sweden is now the eleventh most equal OECD country, beaten by all the Nordic countries, but also, for example, Slovenia, Belgium and Austria.<sup>106</sup> Likewise, the share of total income accruing to the ten per cent with the highest incomes has grown from 22 per cent in the early 1980s to 28 per cent in 2015 according to the World Wealth and Income Database. The redistributive ambitions of the welfare state have diminished so much that social policy scholars question whether Sweden is still a ‘Social Democratic model’. The Swedish welfare state thus moves ever closer to the allegedly Anglo-Saxon Liberal model.<sup>107</sup> Economic and political equality in twentieth century Sweden was not an eternal, unmoveable national trait, but a socio-political construction. As such, it may also be abolished by political means.

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<sup>105</sup> As Berggren and Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa?*, 44, phrase it.

<sup>106</sup> <http://www.oecd.org/social/income-distribution-database.htm>

<sup>107</sup> Kenneth Nelson, ‘Lower Unemployment Benefits and Old-age Pensions is a Major Setback in Social Policy’, *Sociologisk Forskning* 54 (2017), 290.