

The Swedish Sonderweg debated

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There has long existed a notion that the relative equality that existed in Sweden by the middle of the 20th century culminating around 1980, was contingent on a state of relative equality already in pre-industrial times finding expression in peasant representation in the Riksdag, in local jurisdiction and in extensive peasant-farmer ownership of land. This path into modern society has been seen as exceptional, a Sonderweg.

In recent years, this interpretation has been questioned, not least in Thomas Piketty's book *Capital and Ideology* (2020) claiming that Sweden before 1900 was a deeply unequal society, more unequal than other European countries. According to Piketty the high degree of equality of post-war Sweden was instead the result of an unusually effective popular mobilization after about 1900 combined with particular political strategies and special social and fiscal institutions. Here, Piketty is basing himself, to a large extent, on an article by Erik Bengtsson in *Past & Present* (2019).

This panel will discuss the economic and political evidence on which these contrasting analyses, and other interpretations of the Swedish development are based.

On equality and lack of equality in Sweden before 1920

Carl-Johan Gadd, University of Gothenburg

My contribution deals mainly with the period 1700-1920, but begins with a discussion of the medieval origins of the Swedish peasant representation in the Riksdag and in local politics. An important underlying cause is that 15th-century Swedish peasant uprisings were often comparatively successful. Peasant revolts contributed, among other things, to the appointment and removal of regents and kings.

After the 1540s, peasant uprisings were remarkably few. According to one interpretation, the reason was that the peasant representation in the Riksdag and local politics had led to a degree of consensus between rulers and subjects. An alternative interpretation is that the lack of rebellions is due to the repressive capacity of the Swedish armed forces. However, the events surrounding the relatively peaceful peasant uprising that took place in the 1740s suggest that this repressive capacity was weak.

What did the parliamentary representation involve? While it is well known that the Peasants had little influence on foreign, finance and defense policy, the fact that the peasant estate actually had a significant influence on domestic economic-policy issues – such as forest policy and the strip-consolidation reforms comparable in scope to the English enclosures (storskifte, laga skifte) – has often gained less attention.

Another important question is the change in relative sizes of land possession between the nobility, the peasant-farmers and the Crown during the period 1700-1900. This leads to the issue of economic and social inequality in rural areas (the latter containing 90% of population still in 1850). The relative size of the Swedish agrarian underclass was comparatively small still by the middle of the 19th century. Furthermore, before the 1870s there was little lasting

economic stratification within the land-owning stratum among the peasant-farmers, since those who owned relatively large landholdings and had several heirs would often prefer to split the farms when the estates were distributed.

There is little doubt that the parliamentary reform of 1866, with its strong limitation of the right to vote, was a reactionary attempt by the – numerically weak – upper classes to steer development in a direction desired by them. But this highlights the issue of the conditions for the relatively undramatic transition to parliamentary democracy around 1920.

"En gemensam skandinavisk väg till demokratin? Konstitutioner och rörelser, ca 1809-1940"

Erik Bengtsson, Lund University and University of Gothenburg

Det är vanligt att förstå Skandinaviens (ibland Nordens) vägar till demokrati och välfärdsstat som likartade eller t o m samma. Hos Esping-Andersen har den "socialdemokratiska modellen" av en universell välfärdsstat t o m blivit synonym med den "skandinaviska" modellen. Jag vill ägna denna artikel åt att diskutera vägarna mot demokrati i de tre skandinaviska länderna. I min bok *Världens jämlikaste land?* (2020) har jag visat att skillnaderna i rösträtt var stora i slutet av 1800-talet. Den svenska representationsreformen gav en femtedel av vuxna män rösträtt till andra kammaren, medan en tredjedel hade rösträtt i Norge, och tre fjärdedelar i Danmark. På 1890-talet var andelarna 24 procent, 77 procent och 66 procent. Runt 1920 införde alla tre universell rösträtt, också för kvinnor. Det finns alltså likheter, såväl som skillnader mellan de tre länderna.

Jag fokuserar på demokratiseringen, men diskuterar också välfärdsstaten. Anledningen är att, enligt min hypotes, sättet som ett land demokratiseras på sätter ramarna också för den efterkommande politiken, på mellanlång sikt. Statsvetarna Ruth Berins Collier och David Collier gör detta argument i *Shaping the Political Arena* (2002), där de undersöker demokrati, stat och politik i åtta latinamerikanska länder, och visar just hur demokratiseringen kan ses som en "critical juncture" där förutsättningarna sätts för politiken därefter. Hos Esping-Andersen, i *Politics against Markets: The Social Democratic Road to Power* (1985) hade de skandinaviska länderna en gemensam bakgrund till välfärdsstaten, i en klass-koalition mellan bönder och arbetare. Jag är, vilket jag förklarat i *Världens jämlikaste land?*, mer skeptisk till denna förklaring, åtminstone för Sveriges del. Sveriges Lantmannaparti var inte motsvarigheten till Danmarks eller Norges Venstre.

Inte desto mindre, så blev utfallen i de skandinaviska länderna liknande. Jag vill därför gå tillbaka till den konstitutionella politiken, från Sveriges regeringsform 1809 och Norges liberala grundlag 1814, till Danmarks Junigrundlov 1849 och så vidare till demokratiseringen kring 1920. Charles Tilly har citerat den brittiske statsmannen Disraeli som 1872 uttalade sig om Lord Greys Reform Act från 1832: "Gentlemen, that was the origin of Chartism..." Som detta citat antyder tror jag att konstitutionella reformer – som ofta kan förklaras med sociala och politiska rörelser – i sin tur formar nästkommande rörelser. Därför handlar min artikel om dynamiken mellan reformer och rörelser i Skandinavien från 1809 och något mer än hundra år framåt. Det handlar om att beskriva och jämföra, men också att diskutera: kan sättet som dessa länder demokratiserades på, förklara varför socialdemokratin blev så stark i alla tre?

The complex Swedish road towards (and away from?) equality

Erik Örjan Emilsson, University of Gothenburg

A problem with most discussions of how the unusually egalitarian character of post-war Swedish society came about, is the search for single-factor explanations, usually accompanied by a static view of Swedish history. The notion of early Swedish history as built upon an unchanging fundament of free peasants is seldom propagated nowadays, except in some Wikipedia articles. But the free peasants are often invoked – sometimes rightly so, as this is an obvious contrast against the larger nations who usually shape our notions of general (European) history. The problem is to assess when it's relevant and what difference it made.

What we might call the “shortcut explanations” – that present freedoms are caused by earlier freedom etc, were dealt a severe blow by Erik Bengtsson's demonstration that late 19th century Sweden was the most unequal society in (western) Europe. He has been followed by Thomas Piketty, who also used the example of Sweden's transformation from most unequal political system to “one of the lowest levels of [economic] inequality ever observed anywhere” to refute identitarian notions of permanent cultural values.

The development after 1980, however, shows a fast-increasing economic inequality, the fastest in the OECD, and Sweden is now even acquiring a growing proportion of dollar billionaires. Not only did Sweden move from most to least unequal, but the direction of change has since then been reversed! So, are we witnessing a return to the position as a profoundly inegalitarian country which is how Piketty describes Sweden before the 20th century?

It's even more complex than that. What Piketty doesn't seem to have realized, and Bengtsson doesn't really discuss, is that Sweden before 1848 had an electorate considerably wider than any other national assembly (only excepting France in the revolutionary 1790's). The reason behind this is that Sweden – alone among the European Parliaments and Estate Assemblies before universal suffrage, comprised four Estates, the fourth representing the male peasant householders. The “profoundly inegalitarian” political system where votes became proportional to wealth was an innovation of the 1860's, actually lowering Sweden's political representativity at the time when the rest of (western) Europe was starting to extend it. But evidently this attempt backfired and the development changed direction. Why? And why is it changing again? And how had the peasantry become an Estate of the Realm to begin with?

State Capacity, Institutions, and Trade: Sweden's Rise and Fall as an Empire

Jari Eloranta, University of Helsinki

Petri Karonen, University of Jyväskylä

Henric Häggqvist, Uppsala University

Jeremy Land, University of Helsinki

The growing body of scholarship on state capacity suggests that: 1) Europe was pulling ahead of other regions on the globe in the early modern period on the basis of trade expansion and increasing military power, and 2) state capacity in this period was mostly dedicated to the purposes of extending the state's monopoly of violence. It is less clear why this was the case, i.e. what the root causes of Europe's rising state capacity were. The interplay of institutions needed to expand military power and fiscal expansion was a fundamental factor in these

processes. Here we examine an unlikely candidate for an empire, namely early modern Sweden, where the construction of an effective bureaucracy and the increase in military power went in parallel during the 16th and 17th centuries. Sweden had scarce financial and human resources, so it was based on both an offensive strategy and that "the war had to pay for itself." The military burden of the expansion was, in comparative European terms, manageable, and it went hand in hand with the development of an efficient state bureaucracy and relatively low levels of corruption. The strategy worked well until the early 18th century, when confronted by more powerful enemies and inept domestic leadership. From the 1720s onwards, the military sector's share of the expenditures turned to a slow decline. The Swedish state was often forced to rely on inflationary income and new budgetary innovations to finance wars. However, a centralized state remained as a long-term structural element for Sweden, even though it had to eventually open up trade, commit to political neutrality, and implement a democratic system. All of these characteristics contributed to the modern transition toward an encompassing fiscal state with potential to transition later into a welfare state.