Social Origins of Swedish Democracy: the role of Agrarian Politics

Erik Bengtsson

Lund University, Sweden

Address: Erik Bengtsson, Dept. of Economic History, Box 7080, 220 07 Lund, Sweden

E-mail: erik.bengtsson@ekh.lu.se

13,257 words, 1 table

Abstract

In discussions of Scandinavian democratization, it is commonplace to argue that long-standing farmer representation in parliament and a lack of feudalism facilitated early democratization. The present essay questions this interpretation in the Swedish case. It centers on a re-interpretation of farmer politics at the national level from the 1866-67 two-chamber parliament reform to the alliance between the farmers’ party and Social Democracy in 1933. I show that Swedish farmers did not organize themselves independently of nobles and land-owners until the 1920s, and did not play the role of an independent pro-democratic force. The broad-based organizations of farmers in the 1920s and 1930s, with their democratic, participatory culture, were heavily influenced by the political culture of liberals and the labor movement. The implication for analyses of democratization is that deep roots are less decisive than often supposed, and that modern political agency and organization conversely, in contrast to influential research traditions and theories of democracy, can reverse undemocratic traditions.

Keywords: democratization, agrarian politics, Sweden, class politics, farmers.

* Research financed by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond grant “Dynamic peasants? Agency and inequality in Swedish modernization”, P16-0412:1. Thanks to Agnes Cornell, Josefin Hägglund, Anton Jansson, Johannes Lindvall, Mats Olsson, Jan Teorell and Carolina Uppenberg, and to participants in the Economic and Social History Colloquium, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and the STANCE seminar, Lund, for their comments.
1. Introduction

Sweden is known as a stable democracy. Why did Sweden become a stable democratic country, as it did in the 1920s and 1930s? And why did a Social Democratic model, rather than a more liberal model, evolve? In the most prominent explanations, farmers play a key role. For comparative sociologists such as Esping-Andersen and Luebbert, the political choices made by farmers during the Great Depression are the key.\(^1\) While farmers in Germany supported Fascism, in Scandinavia they went into coalitions with Social Democracy, entailing Keynesian economic policies and building welfare states. Other researchers also focus on the farmers as the key group for (social) democratic outcomes in this region, but look for deeper roots of the farmers’ influence. In this stream of the literature it was not the red-green alliance of the 1930s that gave rise to democratic societies with generous welfare states, but rather the farmers themselves, with a tradition going further back in history. The farmers put the region on a democratic trajectory, either because of material interests – in the research tradition following Barrington Moore, on social drivers of political regimes – or through the establishment of a political culture of egalitarianism.\(^2\) Views of a long tradition of “farmer democracy” in Sweden are typically founded on farmers’ representation in parliament, and on their power in the

---


parishes. The agrarian-oriented account of Swedish democratization has something to say for it: 80 per cent of the Swedish population in 1900 resided in rural areas, and farmers constituted about a quarter of the population. Hence agrarian politics must be an important part of the story of Swedish democratization.

But contrary to the conventional account, there was no steady contribution of farmer politics to democracy, no continuity from early modern peasant representation to twentieth century social democracy. To make this point, this paper takes a step back and re-evaluates the role of agrarian interests in Swedish democratization c. 1866–1933. This span of time begins with the constitutional reform of 1865-66 which abolished the four estates diet of medieval descent and replaced it with a two-chamber parliament. The analysis ends in the 1930s, with the ‘red-green’ coalition of the Social Democrats and the Farmers’ League. The period here considered thus straddles the key suffrage reforms of 1909 and 1918 and the establishment of parliamentary (instead of royal) rule in the 1910s, which together made Sweden a democracy. The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, I provide a new analytical account of the changing stance of the farmer class with regard to democratization. The key factor is the class alliances that the farmers enter into – do they ally with the estate owners, as in 1867, or with the working class, as in 1933? A recent alleged “historical turn” in democratization studies has argued for the role of contingency and politics in democratization; I provide a case study in this vein. I argue that class interest is highly relevant to understand

---


politics, but that we should not expect a constant policy stance of a class, but rather a varying stance depending upon the varying salience of different social conflicts, and the shaping of class alliances over time. Second, by investigating farmer politics, I contribute to the explanation of the democratic – more precisely, Social Democratic – regime outcome in twentieth century Sweden, which has been much debated. Sweden often is presented as an emblematic case of stable democratization, so understanding this case is essential.⁷

2. Democratization and agrarian politics

Analysis of macro-political change and democratization in relation to agrarian class structure has a long tradition. In Barrington Moore’s influential analysis, the bourgeoisie, through its stereotypical association with liberalism, was the guarantor of liberal-democratic development.⁸ Researchers following Moore but focusing on Sweden have pointed out that historically its bourgeoisie was relatively weak, but the country still ended up on a liberal democratic trajectory. These researchers have then turned to the strength of the farmer class. According to Castles, who points to the unique peasant representation in the estates diet since the 1500s, “the peasants were already in the parliamentary arena, and could act as an important counterweight to plutocratic influence. /.../ in a sense, the farmers held the line until industrialism produced a liberal middle class capable of asserting its own rights.”⁹ Tilton similarly asserts that “in Sweden the peasants often played the role that the bourgeoisie played elsewhere.”¹⁰ Various

---

¹⁰ Tilton, “Social Origins”, p. 565. The image from Tilton of a farmer-dominated relatively egalitarian rural economy in Sweden is reproduced also in the more recent political science literature – see Ben W. Ansell and David J. Samuels, *Inequality and Democratization: An Elite-Competition Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge
versions of the peasant-legacies-guaranteeing-democracy thesis crop up in the literature; one example is the bald assertion that "Swedish traditions of peasant democracy helped to cement an alliance with the Peasants League in the 1930s which allowed the Social Democrats to form their first effective government".\textsuperscript{11} Farmers’ local political power in villages and parishes has often been located in the tradition of a peculiarly Swedish political culture of negotiation and “peasant democracy” putting Sweden on a democratic Sonderweg.\textsuperscript{12}

However, the present paper questions this proposed continuity from an early modern “peasant democracy” to the 1930s. The paper is mainly empirical, but a short discussion of the theory, or rather the assumption, of the connections between the farmer class and democratization is warranted. What kind of values can we expect farmers to have in common? What kind of general views can be derived from their socio-economic position and interest? As a bare assumption, I believe that the following works for a study of nineteenth and twentieth century farmer politics. Farmers value and defend their independence and try to sustain a lifestyle built on ownership and independence, which also yields an acceptable material standard of living, in relation to society as a whole. Rokkan in his study of the Norwegian farmers’ party in the 1920s and 1930s was already pointing to a duality in farmers’ politics.\textsuperscript{13} On the one hand, they are fierce believers in private property. In defending property rights – and opposing (agrarian) trade unions – they sometimes unite with Conservative parties. On the other, they want to uphold their material living standards, and when the market does not

\begin{itemize}
\item Eva Österberg, ”Bönder och centralmakt i det tidigmoderna Sverige: Konflikt - kompromiss - politisk kultur”, Scandia, 55, No. 1 (1989); Peter Aronsson, Bönder gör politik: Det lokala självstyret som social arena i tre smålandssocknar, 1680–1850 (Lund: Lund University, 1992).
\end{itemize}
guarantee these, farmers may demand protectionism, subsidies and state regulation, which can all carry them into alliances with labor politicians who support state regulation of the economy.

The pendulum swing between defence of private property principles, and state regulation, is amply illustrated in the literature. In Lipset’s analysis, conflicts with the world market and its fluctuating prices drove Saskatchewan wheat farmers to socialism, but the discontent with market slumps can, of course, also be channeled into far-right policies, as exemplified by Germany during the Great Depression.14 Farmers in commercialized economies recurrently run into problems and conflicts with banks, as in Sweden in the 1840s, or transport companies, especially railroad companies.15 Middlemen and merchants form another source of frequent conflict, which in many contexts has caused farmers to create their own cooperative organizations, for example, the French syndicats.16 But agrarian trade unions and labor movements can also push farmers into right-wing politics; Aasland shows that Norwegian farmers organized in the new farmers’ party after 1896 especially in regions with a clear divide between farmers and proletarians.17

Farmers, then, may be involved in several areas of conflict in industrial society. Their “class interest” is not unitary and pre-determined, but must be articulated and organized, and the way that this takes shape is contingent upon the relative salience of the various conflicts.

Existing farmer-oriented explanations of Swedish democratization take a static view of a class

---

as a constant “thing”, instead of a relationship.\textsuperscript{18} In analyses such as Castles’ or Tilton’s, the role of the farmers is constant over time – as carriers of liberal values or even, as for Stråth, “figures of equality”.\textsuperscript{19} This ignores the variation in the characteristics and relations of the farmer class over time. Instead, we need to consider the farmers’ relation to other classes in terms of political and ideological leadership. The class structure can affect political outcomes only via political mobilization. Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens contend, following Lipset and Rokkan, that farmers in Sweden organized independently of estate owners and thus were able to become a pro-democratic force.\textsuperscript{20} Following Moore in finding estate owners a naturally anti-democratic force, since they rely on cheap labor and tend to support the repression of workers to keep wages low\textsuperscript{21}, farmers led by estate owners are assumed to have been nullified as a pro-democratic factor. I am convinced by the theoretical argument but will show that it is empirically faulty for Sweden in the 1860s and later; only gradually from the 1900s on did the farmers found their own organizations and parties, and broke free from the leadership of the estate owners.

\textit{Swedish farmers, mid-nineteenth century}

In mid-nineteenth century Sweden, where the empirical analysis of the paper begins, the definition of peasant farmer (\textit{bonde}), was a person who tilled taxed farm land and was not a member of the nobility or gentry. In 1845, freeholders owned 60 per cent and farmers tilled 80

\textsuperscript{18} One could see this as a dialectical perspective on class politics, in line with the perspective in Friedrich Engels, \textit{Anti-Dühring} (Leipzig, 1878). In more contemporary parlance, one could appeal to the criticism of Moore’s “sweeping trajectories” in Capoccia and Ziblatt, ”The Historical Turn”, and their advocacy instead of “contingency”.


The discrepancy indicates the presence of a rather large group of tenant farmers. The nobility (0.5% of the population) owned 17 per cent of the land, non-noble landlords owned 12 per cent, and the Crown 11 per cent. To be a farmer gave political rights: freeholders and crown tenants (but not tenants of the nobility), could vote for the farmers’ estate in the Diet. They also had political power in the parishes, which were responsible for poor relief, schooling and the like, along with purely ecclesiastical issues. With the enclosure movements of the late nineteenth century, the village became less important as a political unit and the parish more important.

Farmer households in 1750 had constituted about three quarters of agrarian households, but by 1850 this share had shrunk to a half, because the agrarian underclasses, landless and semi-landless, had grown substantially. Sweden experienced an ‘agricultural revolution’ of growing productivity from 1750 to 1870; farmers’ wealth quadrupled in the nineteenth century. While the older literature on agrarian development emphasized the agency of agrarian elites, more recent research insists that ordinary farmers also acted in an economically rational way to increase production and yields, for example, by arranging enclosures. Commercialization also grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, with increasing exports of oats to Britain and, after having to compete with cheap grains from America and Russia, increasing sales of butter and milk in the 1870s and 1880s. Besides exports, sales opportunities improved dramatically with increased industrialization and

---

urbanization after c. 1870, at a time when a growing share of the population had to depend on bought food. However, economic disparities within the farmer group also grew. Farmers in areas adjacent to cities or transport centers (such as ports) benefited more than isolated farmers, and the group of farmers with very small holdings grew substantially. To understand the politics of Swedish farmers c. 1850 we must, then, understand them in relation not only to cities and urban dwellers, as is conventional, but also in relation to the agrarian upper class of estate owners, and a rapidly growing agrarian underclass. We must also consider the growing socio-economic fragmentation within the farmer class itself.

3. Farmers as conservatives, mid-nineteenth century

The idea that farmers led the way in Sweden’s road to democracy is related to the notion of its relatively early and harmonious democratization. To get the contribution of the farmers right, we also need to get democratization right. It is important, then, to point out that the two-chamber system established in 1866, which replaced the four estates diet (nobility, clergy, burghers and farmers) descending from the mediaeval model was very undemocratic. The wealth and income censuses meant that only about 20 per cent of adult men had the right to vote on the members of the second chamber and 2 per cent on the members of the first. This became an important guarantee of conservatism. The Second Reform Act of 1867 in Britain gave 59 per cent of adult men the right to vote; in Bismarck’s Germany, all adult men had this right; and in

28 Mats Morell, Jordbruket i industrisamhället: 1870-1945 (Stockholm: LTs förlag, 2001), pp. 84–101
29 For example Carlsson’s brilliant study of farmer politics in the 1890s is framed as “Farmer politics and industrialism”, as if industrialism was the exogenous variable and farmers were reacting to it. Mohlin in a later study dogmatically follows the modernist-industrial paradigm. Sten Carlsson, Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen: partigruppering och opinionsförskjutningar i svensk politik 1890–1902 (Stockholm: Lantbruksförbundets Tidskrifts AB, 1953); Yngve Mohlin, Bondepartiet och det moderna samhället 1914–1936: En studie av svensk agrarianism (Umeå: Umeå University, 1989).
Sweden’s Scandinavian neighbors, 73 per cent of Danish men and 33 per cent of Norwegian men had the right to vote.\textsuperscript{32} Its 1866 reform made Sweden stand out as the least democratic. Furthermore, there were no major reforms of the system until 1909.

\textit{Agrarian social movements and politics in the 1840s and 1850s: a Scandinavian comparison}

What kind of policies did the farmer estate pursue in the final decades of the estates diet, before the 1866 reform? Following the arguments above, their relationship to the unrepresented classes is key. Farmers represented in the four estates diet showed very little interest in protecting tenant farmers when they went on strike in the 1770s and the 1860s; tenant farmers, who did not have the right to vote, were assumed to be represented by their landlords.\textsuperscript{33} That freeholders and crown tenants in parliament showed no interest in the plight of the tenant farmers under the nobility betrays a certain lack of solidarity within the farmer class itself. It is also a telling comment on the farmers’ attitude to the lower classes. Furthermore, farmer MPs in the 1840s and 1850s generally advocated harsh regulation of the work of proletarians, acting in their self-interest as employers themselves.\textsuperscript{34}

The thesis of a long-standing tradition of peasant democracy assumes continuity: proto-democracy \textit{then} (in the early modern period) evolved into democracy \textit{now} (post-1920). But the actual convulsions of Scandinavian farmer politics in the 1840s and 1850s call for a more complex account. Whereas Norway and Denmark saw major pro-reform, pro-


\textsuperscript{34} Carolina Uppenberg, “Peasant estate representatives or employers? How peasant MPs in the Swedish Estate Diet understood servants’ labour and labour laws”, (Lund: Lund University, 2019).
democratization farmer movements in the late 1840s, Sweden saw no such thing. (Of course, one could also compare with British Chartism.) Norway in these years saw the evangelically motivated but also socially rooted Thrane movement, while Denmark saw major movements of both farmers and semi-proletarians in agriculture. These movements succeeded in pushing through reforms, at least in Denmark: both a new relatively liberal constitution in 1849, and a new crofter law in 1848 which limited corvée labor. Strikingly, the Danish representation reform of 1849 was more democratic than the Swedish reform of almost twenty years later.

Why, then, did Sweden lack such popular agrarian movements in the 1840s? Østerud explains this by reference to the “co-optation of the Swedish peasantry”, while Nielsen in his Nordic comparison comments that ‘in a way, the Swedish farmers paid the price for having ‘first arrived’”, meaning, having achieved representation in parliament and parish. Here we must complicate the issues. Not all farmers paid equally (or arrived equally) – rather, the poorer farmers, the tenants of the nobility and the proletarian and semi-proletarian groups paid for the relatively generous inclusion in the system of the more wealthy farmers who were freeholders or tenants of the Crown. The inclusion of parts of the peasantry meant – following a divide-and-conquer logic – that the farmers who had been included could unite with the upper classes and disregard possible chances of solidarity with unrepresented farmers and agrarian underclasses. To be sure, there were farmer MPs in the 1840s and 1850s who took a radical view, criticized fundamental injustice in society and proposed universal suffrage and universal schooling. But they, like the great radical and eccentric Sven Heurlin, were marginalized in an estates diet stuffed with privileged nobles and conservative clergy. As we will see, the

---


36 Østerud, Agrarian Structure, p. 205. Kayser Nielsen, Bonde, stat og hjem, p. 156

37 Cf. Olofsson, Tullbergska rörelsen, p. 251.

38 On Heurlin, see Christensen, Bönder och herrar, especially pp. 153, 278ff; and Henrik Olsson, Öst och väst eller nord och syd? Regionala politiska skillnader inom den svenska bondegruppen under 1800-talet (Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 1998), especially pp. 75–76, 89. One of Heurlin’s statements in the Diet, from 1840, can be seen as an important precursor of the argument made here about farmers’ actions and hegemony: “there
conservatism of Swedish elite farmers – the ones with a say in local and national politics – had lasting implications.

Civil society

The civil society of mid-nineteenth century Swedish farmers was strikingly weak, between the break-up of the villages with the enclosures in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the new forms of organization emerging from the 1880s and 1890s on. As one historian lamented about the social consequences of the enclosures and the break-up of the villages: "The old, happy village festivals were irrevocably over. In many parts of the country, the farmers were transformed from jolly co-operators and collectivists to sombre individualists."39 In the mid-nineteenth century, the main organizations for agricultural improvement ran very much top-down: the county-level Hushållningssällskap were according to statute led by the king’s man in the county, the county governor (landshövding), and the agricultural meetings, venues for discussions to improve the industry that started in 1846, were dominated by the estate owners.40

---

In Denmark in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s farmers took the initiative of holding their own agricultural improvement meetings and forming agrarian cooperatives. A very different comparison but with the same result would be with the Midwest and the South of the United States: the organizational landscape of the Swedish farmers in the 1860s and 1870s is distinctively less impressive than what is found in U.S. studies of the Granger movement, the Farmers’ Alliance and related movements in the Midwest and the South. The Grange might have been diverse and declined rapidly after its high point in the 1870s, but it was a genuine farmers’ movement – in Sweden, one could say that nothing of the kind appeared until 1929; cooperatives emerged from the 1880s onwards, but a broader “farmers’ union”, as we will see, did not emerge until 1929. In Sweden such independent organizing – so important for farmers’ democratic tendencies, as Lipset and Rokkan and Rueschemeyer et al. note – would not take place until the 1880s and 1890s.

A fascinating case study is provided by Nyström in his study of a major potato-producing estate in the west of Sweden. Nyström asks why, when the estate was up for sale in 1857, it was not split up into a multitude of farms, in this period of supposed farmer enrichment and advancement. Instead, the estate was sold as a whole to a bourgeois. Nyström’s answer is telling: the land was by turns too damp and too dry, and needed an irrigation system to augment productivity. Such a project could not have been coordinated by farmers in the conditions of the time, Nyström argues: the village system had been broken up by the enclosures, and the farmers had no new traditions or cooperative organizations. Therefore, a single owner was the


43 Lars Nyström, Potatisriket: Stora Bjurum 1857-1917: Jorden, makten, samhället (Gothenburg University, 2003), pp. 46-50)
only viable economic form of ownership for those lands. Given that Swedish farmers seventy-eighty years later became famous for their degree of organization and corporatist activity, Nyström’s analysis is illuminating as well as damning. The lack of connection between the older forms of farmer cooperation – work-sharing in the village, parish-level risk-sharing – and the producer and consumer cooperatives growing in importance from the 1890s has been noted, and had implications for the political articulation of class consciousness.


Also on the level of party politics, Swedish farmers were weaker in self-sufficient organization than we might expect. In Denmark and Norway, the farmers by the 1860s were organized in left-wing parties against the Conservative parties of the estate owners. These farmers indeed played the role of democratizers which we would expect from the literature. But the situation in Sweden was very different.

The farmers represented in the estates diet of the 1800s were drawn from the wealthier members of their class, and by definition excluded the tenants of the nobility. The relatively elite nature of the farmer MPs did not escape the attention of the many landed nobles of the noble estate. Already in the 1840s conservative estate owners called the Junker Party in the noble estate, were seeking a cross-estate alliance with wealthy farmers. In the debate on representation reform, this Junker group wanted to keep the estates diet, but amend it (to include a gentry estate, for example), rather than going for the more ‘liberal’ solution of a two-chamber parliament. To reach this solution, the Junkers, who saw that the farmer class was becoming

richer but also more differentiated, and that the agrarian underclasses were growing, strove for
a coalition with the wealthy farmers, to counter a possible liberal coalition of farmers and
burghers.

The proposed coalition of estate owners and wealthy farmers failed in the 1840s, but succeeded in 1866, ironically enough when the coming two-chamber parliament, against
which the Junkers had fought, called for new alliances. An exclusively noble party was no
longer enough, and the nobles needed to seek new allies. Someone who realized this perhaps
earlier than anyone else was Count Arvid Posse, a conservative estate owner, vigorous opponent
of the representation reform and ‘agrarian capitalist of the purest water’ – he had significant
stakes in banking and industrial interests, and was a large exporter of agricultural products.47
He sought to organize a conservative opposition to the reigning ‘moderate-liberal’ government,
on the lines of a rural identity.48 The common interpretation of Posse’s initiative to build an
estate owner–farmer alliance, even in his own time, was that its main motive, if not vanity, was
to nullify any possibility of farmer radicalism in the new two-estate chamber.49 Posse was
chairman of a local bank; he owned parts of and sat on boards of companies in coal, cement
and iron businesses, among others.50 He would easily fit into a Prussian stereotype of the fusion
of agrarian and industrial interests in support of authoritarianism, ‘iron and rye’51, but since he
does not fit into the Swedish teleology, he has mostly been ignored, by Swedish historians and
comparativists alike. The party formation for which he was crucial, the Country Party
(Lantmannapartiet), is misrepresented throughout the international literature. For example,
Esping-Andersen in his brilliant book, in a short discussion of the party, commits two errors:

47 Sven Anders Söderpalm, ”Arvid R F Posse”. Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon, vol. 29 (Stockholm, Riksarkivet,
48 Edvard Thermaenius, Lantmannapartiet: Dess uppkomst, organisation och tidigare utveckling (Uppsala
49 Eric Holmqvist, Aristokrater, bönder och byråkrater: Skånska riksdagsmän på 1800-talet (Stockholm: Liber
förlag, 1980), pp. 88-89, 156; Rune Bokholm, Kungen av Skåne: En bok om statsmannen Arvid Posse (Lund:
Historiska Media, 1998), pp. 144-147
50 Bokholm, Kungen av Skåne, pp. 78, 95.
“In 1867, the farmers formed the Lantmannapartiet, basically a liberal parliamentary group…”\textsuperscript{52} First, the party was formed by Count Posse and the gentry estate owner Emil Key\textsuperscript{53} with the help of Carl Ifvarsson, a farmer – it was not a farmer initiative, but a noble and gentry initiative. Second, the party cannot rightfully be characterized as liberal. Both errors reinforce a preconception of the continuity of democracy in Swedish farmer politics, which is reproduced in more current literature as well.\textsuperscript{54}

The main political tendency of the party was the will to shift taxation from land to the non-agricultural economy, and an overall conservatism.\textsuperscript{55} A good deal can be said about Posse’s authoritarian personality and role in Swedish society; some basic facts must suffice. In the election campaign to parliament in 1869, he threatened his tenant farmers with eviction unless they voted for him, and manipulated the counting of votes; and when in 1867-69 a wave of tenant farmer strikes and claims to land held by nobles swept over the south of Sweden, where Posse’s estate was located, he personally sued the leader of the farmers’ movement.\textsuperscript{56} Even his biographer, whose admiration for his subject shines through on every page, admits that Posse’s rule over his subordinates and over his party was authoritarian.\textsuperscript{57} That this man as party leader deliberately deferred all parliamentary decisions on suffrage extension when the issue arose should not be seen as surprising. It must emphasized that the system defended by Posse and the Country Party was one of the most undemocratic in Europe.

\textsuperscript{52} Esping-Andersen, \textit{Politics against Markets}, p. 83.
\textsuperscript{53} Tellingly, the biography of Emil Key by his loving daughter Ellen, a well-known author in her own right, states that Key’s first political action as a young man was to join a counter-revolutionary guard in 1848. Ellen Key, \textit{Minnen av och om Emil Key}, two volumes (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers Förlag, 1915–1917), vol. I, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{56} Olofsson, \textit{Tullbergska rörelsen}, pp. 130–1, 186.
\textsuperscript{57} Bokholm, \textit{Kungen av Skåne}, p. 399.
The period after 1866 in Sweden should, then, be seen as one of landlords’ hegemony over the farmers, in the sense that Gramsci used the concept to denote the intellectual, moral and political leadership of one class by another.\textsuperscript{58} In the nation’s politics, the landlords – Posse, Key and the like – very directly through the Country Party led the farmers, and they also led the agrarian improvement societies and meetings. In their rhetoric the Country Party represented the ordinary people of the countryside\textsuperscript{59}, but in practice they represented only the interests of estate owners and the wealthiest strata of farmers. The Country Party stood for the right of the master-employer to physically discipline his workers; vehement oppression of the trade unions\textsuperscript{60}; and the preservation of plutocracy in municipality and country. Unlike the farmers’ party Venstre (the Left) in Denmark, they did not challenge royal power.\textsuperscript{61} Nevertheless, later research on political history has uncritically reproduced an image of the Country Party as the representative of the “agrarian interest” \textit{tout court} – in other words, has reproduced precisely the hegemonic claims of the leadership. Perry Anderson’s distinction between a hegemonic class and a corporate class suits the political division of labour between nobility and farmers in Sweden post-1866 very well: “A hegemonic class seeks to transform society in its own image, inventing afresh its economic system, its political institutions, its cultural values, its ‘mode of insertion’ into the world. A corporate class seeks to defend and improve its own position within a social order accepted as given.”\textsuperscript{62}


\textsuperscript{59} An example is when Peterson in Påboda, the first farmer to become a cabinet minister in Sweden, by his biographer (his son), is said to have represented ”den jordbrukande menigheten”. Knut Petersson, \textit{En bondedemokrat: Alfred Petersson i Påboda} (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1965), p. 70.


\textsuperscript{61} On Venstre and royal power versus parliamentary government in the 1870s, see Lund and Fog Pedersen, \textit{Et folk vägner}, pp. 35–45.

would take a new wave of popular organizing from the 1880s and 1890s on to reformulate any kind of counter-hegemonic movement in Swedish society.\textsuperscript{63}

The ancien regime and the Country Party

At the end of the 1890s, the Country Party, again united after a temporary split over the tariff issue, was a consistently conservative party opposed to any suffrage extensions and expansions of social policies, and traditionally conservative in its preference for the King and Nation.\textsuperscript{64} Any farmer MPs of liberal bent had to join one of the Liberal parties.\textsuperscript{65} In this decade, the conservative establishment ruled comfortably with the estate owner E.G. Boström as Prime Minister, steering the country with a “rikspolitik” heavily influenced by Bismarck’s unifying Reichspolitik.\textsuperscript{66} Under the capitalist status quo of the Boström regime, to borrow a concept from Eley\textsuperscript{67}, profits grew for industrialists and estate owners alike, and by 1900, wealth inequality was steeper in Sweden than in the United States, and on a par with the UK.\textsuperscript{68} Non-action can of course prolong a status quo in favor of the elites\textsuperscript{69}, and this was the case in Sweden in the 1880s and 1890s.

\textsuperscript{63} On the marked conservatism of Swedish politics after the 1866 reform, see Gunnar Wallin, \textit{Valrörelser och valresultat: Andrákammarrvallen i Sverige 1866-1884} (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 1961); Per Hultqvist, \textit{Försvar och skatter: Studier i svensk riksdagspolitik från representationsreformen till kompromissen 1873} (Gothenburg: Göteborgs högskola, 1955); Mellquist, \textit{Rösträtt efter förtjänst?}.

\textsuperscript{64} Cf. Carlsson, \textit{Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen}, Ch. VI

\textsuperscript{65} Of the 190 MPs in the second chamber of 1867, 23 were estate owners and 76 were farmers. In 1886, there were 11 estate owners and 99 farmers out of 214 MPs. In 1867, 7 estate owners and 59 farmers in the chambers were members of the Country Party; in 1885, 9 estate owners and 99 farmers; in other words, 78 per cent of the second chamber farmer MPs in 1867 were members of the party, and in 1886, 100 per cent. Source: J.L. Hartmann, ”Andra kamraren under det odelade lantmannapartiets tid”, in Axel Brusewitz (ed.), \textit{Studier över den svenska riksdagens sociala sammansättning} (Uppsala och Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1936), pp. 132-3, 148. There were oppositional, democratic farmer MPs in parliament, especially in the 1880s and 1890s, but they were a small minority.


\textsuperscript{67} Geoff Eley, \textit{Reshaping the German Right: Radical Nationalism and Political Change after Bismarck} (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 353-4


\textsuperscript{69} On the importance of "drift" for institutional and social change, see Jacob Hacker, Paul Pierson, and Kathleen Thelen, “Drift and conversion: hidden faces of institutional change”, in James Mahoney and Kathleen Thelen (ed.), \textit{Advances in Comparative-Historical Analysis} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 180-208.
Popular mobilization against the status quo began to percolate through the country from the 1870s on, with the so-called popular movements – the temperance movement, the free churches and the trade unions. In the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s so-called folkmöten (popular meetings) started to be held in the countryside with discussions before upcoming elections. By the 1890s, popular organization had reached a new level. In 1892 the suffrage movement collected several hundreds of thousands of names for a suffrage reform, but when the leaders sought to meet the prime minister, they were refused. This insouciance and lack of interest in any popular mobilization are typical of Swedish conservatives during this period. The comment of a leading Country Party politician, Nils Persson in Runtorp, also tells us much: “the noise that they make at their suffrage meetings shows that they are not worthy of the right which they demand”. Since the 1870s farmer MPs from the Country Party had also ceased to propose any reforms to the uniquely unequal suffrage system in place at the municipal level.

The elite character of the Country Party is underlined by the fact that in 1904 it dissolved into the new Conservative party, with its electoral organisation Allmänna Valmansförbundet. This “alliance of steel and rye” confirmed that the propertied classes could indeed unite politically across sectoral borders, although throughout this decade and the next the party would show tensions between industry and agriculture.

It is indicative of the differences in their class alliances in the final decades of the nineteenth century that the Swedish farmer party became a constituent party of the Conservative party, while its Danish and Norwegian colleagues became the main Liberal parties in their countries. The fusion of

---

conservative forces into one united party also meant that when pressure from the Liberal-Social Democratic party led to partial democratization in 1909, the farmers stood without a party of their own. This situation would not last.

5. The development of popular politics and its implications for agrarian politics

The political scientist David Ziblatt in a recent influential book has argued that the difference between Britain and Germany, which explains why democracy in the early twentieth century made steady progress in the former but not in the latter, is that British Conservatives were organized in a strong party, which meant that they expected to win elections and stay in power under democracy.\textsuperscript{75} The German Right, Ziblatt argues, being less organized, had less trust in their electoral machine, and so they desperately fought democracy. As can be inferred, however, I am not convinced that the Swedish case, which Ziblatt also discusses, fits this explanation. The Swedish Right was by no means well-organized, either; they formed an extra-parliamentary party only in 1904, and this did not have much organizational reach. Instead, the key to the Swedish Right’s acceptance of gradual democratic reforms rather lies in the imposition of constitutional guarantees, the continued role of the undemocratic first chamber in particular. Even after the 1909 reform which gave all adult men the right to vote for members of the second chamber (albeit on a 40-vote scale related to income and wealth), the first chamber still gave the elites a political veto.\textsuperscript{76}

An example of inspiration from Germany may illustrate the long-standing insouciance of the Swedish elites. In 1894 and 1895 the German \textit{Bund der Landwirte} (BdL),

\textsuperscript{75} Ziblatt, \textit{Conservative Parties}.
(in)famous in the literature on German political history for its extreme-right influence, inspired Swedish estate owners to form two new organizations for far-right, protectionist agrarian politics, *Svenska agrarföreningen* and *Sveriges agrarförbund*. Affiliated MPs in the second half of the 1890s pursued a nationalist line in relation to the union with Norway, proposed anti-trade union laws, and fought any democratizing initiatives. However, before 1903 this was a purely parliamentary organization. While the *BdL* in 1896 had 18 traveling agitators, the Swedish estate owners saw no need for such populism: with the extreme restrictions of suffrage in place, there was no need for any popular mobilization or persuasion.

By 1910, however, the splendid isolation of the 1890s was no longer an option for elite politics. Extra-parliamentary pressures had grown, and mass politics had undoubtedly made a breakthrough. This was shown in several ways: for one thing the membership of socialist trade unions grew from 8,400 in 1890 to a high of 230,000 in 1905. Moreover, the free churches had been demanding a less privileged position for the Church of Sweden since the 1870s; in 1902 the trade unions mounted a three-day general strike for universal suffrage; the temperance movement in 1909 collected 1.9 million signatures supporting prohibition, and so on. Table 1 presents statistics showing the development of mass politics in Sweden. For comparison, the country had 5.1 million inhabitants in 1900 and in the 1902 *riksdag* election, 180,527 men voted.

---

Table 1. The development of mass politics in Sweden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>Votes for a “People’s Parliament”</td>
<td>149,856</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1897</td>
<td>Suffrage movement’s petition for general suffrage</td>
<td>363,638</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1902</td>
<td>Political three day-mass strike for universal suffrage</td>
<td>~120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>General strike and lock-out</td>
<td>305,771</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1909</td>
<td>Appeal for prohibition</td>
<td>1.9 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1912</td>
<td>Sven Hedin’s militaristic brochure <em>Word of Warning</em></td>
<td>1 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1913</td>
<td>Petition for female suffrage</td>
<td>351,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Farmers’ March: participants and signatures</td>
<td>~70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>Workers’ March</td>
<td>~45,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


By the 1910s, even the Right needed to organize politically. In 1906, the Conservative party leader Lundeberg lamented that “The left is well organized, the right superior and indolent.”81 But with the 1909 suffrage extension and the increased mobilization of Liberals and Socialists, the Right now needed to compete in mass politics too.

---

Social turbulence and populism in the 1910s: the Farmers’ March

In 1911 the first election with the 1909 suffrage reform rules was held, producing a liberal-social democratic landslide at the expense of the conservatives. The lawyer Karl Staaff, who in 1906 had failed with suffrage reform, came back into government. The years of the second Staaff government compose perhaps the most turbulent and polarized period in Swedish political history. Staaff was seen by the Conservative establishment as completely unfit for office, according to his latest biographer, and the smear campaign against him was uniquely brutal: “it is fearsome how thin the varnish of civilization can be when the interests of the privileged are challenged”. Anti-Russian sentiment was rampant and the Conservatives insisted that military spending had to increase dramatically.

The turbulent situation around the Staaff government would lead to a specific populist appeal in 1912–14. Here the policy issue of re-armament was conjoined with broader constitutional issues of constitutional reform. Since the 1880s, parliamentary principles – that the government should be responsible to parliament rather than to the King, as was Swedish custom – had slowly advanced. The debate on royal rule versus parliamentary rule pitted Conservatives against Liberals. By the 1910s, this discussion had heated up in response to the geopolitical situation, and to the hatred of Staaff among the Right. This matters here because the revolt against parliamentary government, specifically a Liberal policy, took the form of a populist appeal to the “true nation”, which was symbolized by the farmer class. Eley, building

---


83 On the constitutional developments see Axel Brusewitz, Kungamakt, herremakt, folkmakt: Författningskampen i Sverige 1906-1918 (Stockholm: Tiden, 1951); Nyman, Högern och kungamakten; Per Sundberg, Ministarrna Bildt och Åkerhielm: En studie i den svenska parlamentarismens förgårdar (Stockholms högskola, 1961).
on the German case, provides a fascinating description of the situations in which populist appeals may gain currency.

“they are a signal that the ability of the dominant classes to speak for the 'people in general' has become impaired, normally through a powerful challenge from below or a breakdown of internal cohesion at the level of the power bloc or the state. In such situations attempts are made to find a new universalizing vision, in this case an ideal of national community amongst citizen-patriots.”

Eley argues that this situation occurred in Germany in the 1890s. In Sweden, it occurred around 1911–14. In 1908, the election slogan of the conservatives was “front against Socialism”.

In the 1890s, Conservatives such as Boström and the Country Party politicians had simply ignored Socialists and democrats, branded them as extremists who would be better suited to police repression than to political debate. But by 1908, the Right also needed popular appeal, and saw the need to fight back against Socialism. The circumstances in which this occurred were tumultuous.

The explorer Sven Hedin, the last Swede to be ennobled, became a travelling agitator in the service of re-armament. In 1912–13 he toured churches, student unions and army regiments, and his wealthy sponsors also paid for the mass distribution of a million militarist brochures, A Word of Warning (Ett varningsord) in 1912. Hedin in the brochure disparaged party politics and the Liberal government, and instead appealed to citizens who had not “been

84 Eley, Reshaping the German Right, p. 202.
blinded by party feuds” and could “stand outside of the political quarrel”. “Party politics” was the target of invective for conservatives in the 1910s; instead, Hedin, in line with populist tradition, appealed to the true Swedish people, and warned of a future in which the fatherland was occupied by Russian troops. His warning that the “German race” must stand against “invasions from the east” would not have been out of place in the German extreme right organizations mapped by Eley. In 1912-13, two separate initiatives appealed for funds from the public to pay for the battleships that the Liberal government did not want to build, and succeeded in collecting a lot of money for this purpose. The mass circulation of Hedin’s brochure and the fund-raising for the battleships signified something new in Swedish conservative politics: a more popular (and populist) approach.88

It was in this atmosphere that the estate owner Uno Nyberg and the merchant and estate owner Jard Frykberg planned an initiative which would be known as the Farmers’ March.89 The acknowledged motive was to convey the farmers’ support for the King, as master of the government, against parliamentary principles. In a nationalist-romantic demonstration of power, playing very deliberately on romantic conceptions of farmers as the “true people”, farmers from all over the country should travel to Stockholm and march to the royal castle to demonstrate their support for the King. The organizers turned to the nationalist history-writing of the day, which portrayed the bonds between farmers and the King as strong throughout Swedish history, especially during the revered “Great Power” period of the seventeenth century.

88 Luebbert, Liberalism, Fascism or Social Democracy, p. 72, argues that the second Staaff government’s fall was due to the rural-urban split, specifically over military expenditure. However, the Farmers’ March should not be seen purely as a valid expression of rural opinion; rather, it was an orchestrated effort by the Right. The fight against the Staaff government should be seen as a Left-Right split. The misreading of the 1914 conflict as a rural-urban one shows up the wider tendency to see agrarian elites’ expressions as representative of their sector tout court; compare the interpretations discussed above of the Country Party as “the agrarian interest”.

89 For the general background see Nyman, Högern och kungamakten. For an insider account, see the book by Frykberg’s daughter: Ragnhild Frykberg, Bondetåget 1914: Dess upprinnelse, inre historia och följder (Stockholm: Hörsta förlag, 1959). This to a large extent builds on his notes from 1913-1914. Frykberg and Nyberg certainly were no ordinary farmers, but they wanted to appear as such. Both Nyberg and Frykberg in their speeches in the Castle courtyard used the concept “odalman” to describe themselves and the Marchers; see the official publication of the March, Bondetåget till Stockholm den 6 februari 1914. The King addressed the participants as “Ye honest men of Swedish farmer stock!” (I redlige män av Sveriges bondestam!) Frykberg, Bondetåget 1914, p. 68.
century.\textsuperscript{90} The instructions to the participants included a ban on top hats\textsuperscript{91} – farmers or not (and the participant lists reveal that many in fact were not farmers), the march was to give a “popular” impression.

Romantic visions aside, the project naturally required complex logistics: to convey the farmers (and other supporters) to Stockholm, to house them and feed them. Handily, the organizers were well-connected members of the elite and could count on the support of the state railroad company (for 35 specially chartered trains), and of the army and wealthy citizens of Stockholm (for housing in barracks and private homes), the state church (for a morning service for all participants in churches all over the city), and the best restaurants of the capital (for gala dinners for all the participants). About 30,000 participants, farmers and others, travelled to Stockholm before the set date of 6 February. Even before the morning Church service, those participants allotted to working-class neighborhoods were already complaining about the taunts and harassment they had faced from political opponents\textsuperscript{92}, but still the day was in general a Nationalist feast. On the appointed day the leading liberal daily \textit{Dagens Nyheter} reported from the preparations that Stockholm had not seen such excitement and fun since the summer of 1912, when the Olympic Games were held there.\textsuperscript{93} After the march to the Stockholm Castle, King Gustav V met the marchers in the main courtyard, where he markedly referred in his speech to “my army” and “my government”, indicating his stance against parliamentary rule and for royal power; to accommodate all the participants the Prince made the same speech in another courtyard. The entire day was a powerful manifestation of the unity between the traditional elites – the church, the universities, the crown, and the large landowners.

\textsuperscript{90} On this nationalist history-writing, see Patrik Hall, \textit{Den svenskaste historien: Nationalism i Sverige under sext sekler} (Stockholm, Carlssons, 2000), pp. 118–125, 215–217

\textsuperscript{91} This instruction is in a memo sent out to participants from the organizers. Uno V. Nyberg, and J.E. Frykberg, “Till landskap och kommittéer!”, Uppsala, 19 January 1914. Archived at the Royal Library (Kungliga Biblioteket) in Stockholm, in its collection of Vardagstryck. Folder: Politik Sv Allm- Kronol. 4:o. Bondetåget 1914.


\textsuperscript{93} \textit{Dagens Nyheter} 6 February 1914, p. 9.
Even those who could not be in Stockholm could celebrate. 45,000 or so signed a petition to show their support of the March, and the celebrations in the two old university towns of Uppsala and Lund are also eloquent. In Uppsala, where 1200 of the university’s 1800 male students signed a petition in support of the March (female students were not allowed to participate); a cathedral service in support was followed by a party with music by the popular chorus Orphei Drängar in the main building of the university, where the guests heard a speech from the rector. In Lund a large patriotic party was arranged at the Museum of Cultural History, with speeches by leading professors of the university.94

Liberals and Social Democrats were affronted by this celebration of and invitation to a royal power grab, and two days later 50,000 counter-demonstrators crossed Stockholm in a Workers’ March against the farmers and in support of parliamentary principles. But Prime Minister Staaff, in the face of open opposition from the King, the Army, the Church and the conservative elites, found his situation untenable and resigned. His government was replaced by an “apolitical” conservative government, a “de facto royal council”.95 The “Farmers’ March” was not a farmers’ initiative, but it came to shape agrarian politics in the years to come.

6. Agrarian politics from authoritarianism to the green-red alliance

In February of 1914, the politicized farmers were pitted against the workers and Social Democrats in fierce political combat, with far-reaching consequences. To celebrate the first anniversary of the Farmers’ March, 6 February 1915, a new agrarian party was founded: the

94 Frykberg, Bondetåget 1914, p. 75; Crister Skoglund, Vita mössor under röda fanor: Vänsterstudenter, kulturrevolution och bildningsideal i Sverige 1880-1940 (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1991), p. 125; Schürer von Waldheim, Bondetåget från Malmöhus län, pp. 43-49.
Farmers’ League (FL). The party was devoted to defending the rural way of life, and its ideology in the 1910s and 1920s was heavily infused with authoritarianism and the race ideology of its day. However, only 18 years later, in the political aftermath of the Great Depression, the Farmers’ League entered into a coalition government with the Social Democrats (SAP), thereby cementing a Social Democratic power which was to persist. In exchange for guaranteed prices for agricultural products, the FL accepted the SAP’s proto-Keynesian economic policy and nascent welfare state project, in the so-called ‘cow trade’. How could there have been such a turn-around: from the almost militant opposition of 1914 to the coalition of 1933?

Conventional accounts would ignore the discontinuity of farmer politics in the turbulent 1910s, assuming instead that the 1933 coalition sprang out of an older cooperative tradition between farmers and workers. A proper contextualization rather highlights the need to explain this U-turn in farmer politics. (We should also note that the SAP hesitated to seek a coalition with the FL, which they feared was infested with authoritarian ideas.) A central part of the explanation for the FL’s shift comes from the biography by Jacob Bjärsdal of Axel Persson in Bramstorp, the leader of the Farmers’ League from 1934–1949. Bjärsdal points out that the 1933 coalition resulted from a palace coup within the FL: the septuagenarian party leader Olsson in Kullenbergstorp was a staunch conservative and fierce opponent of Social Democracy, but his internal opponents, led by Bramstorp, went behind his back, undermined his authority within the party, and signed a coalition with the SAP. The generational shift within the FL was not only a question of age, but of shifting political socialization. The younger

97 On the short-term dynamics of the ‘cow trade’, see the detailed account in Olle Nyman, Krisuppgörelsen mellan Socialdemokraterna och Bondeförbundet 1933 (Uppsala och Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1944). On the long-term ramifications, see especially Esping-Andersen, Politics against Markets.
98 For example Esping-Andersen, Politics against Markets, p. 314; Sørensen and Stråth, “Introduction”.
generation, says Bjärsdal, represented a ‘new sort of farmer’. The new farmer was optimistic, educated in folk high schools and a member of a free church, the temperance movement and especially farmers’ organizations such as the cooperative movement. Bramstorp had never been attracted by the Farmers’ March and its blood-and-soil rhetoric. The elitism of counts and barons in his home district Scania had put him off the Right; thus in 1914 he was a Liberal Party politician. (Kullenbergstorp on the other hand had been the leader of the Scania section of the Farmers’ March.) This also meant that when the Depression hit, Bramstorp was a leading farmer politician who still had fond memories of the 1918 Liberal-Social Democratic coalition in support of universal suffrage. This, much overlooked in a historiography which has romanticized the role of farmer and underestimated the importance of Lib-Labism in early twentieth century Sweden, was the real continuity from the 1910s to 1933. Beyond the personal importance of Bramstorp’s liberal past, furthermore, we must look at the wider social context: the agrarian schools, the popular movements and the cooperatives.

The social and material basis of the “new farmer”

Above, I have stressed that in the mid-nineteenth century, following the break-up of the villages but before the spread of any popular movement, the farmers were relatively isolated and disorganized. By the 1930s, this had changed fundamentally. In the 1880s, the increased intensity of investment in agriculture led to the first formation of farmers’ cooperatives; they were set up to cut prices, especially of concentrate and fertilizers. However, the producer

---

100 Jacob Bjärsdal, Bramstorp: Bondeledare, kohandlare, brobyggare (Stockholm: LTs förlag, 1992), p. 124; cf. 181. Nyman, Krisuppgörelsen, also discusses the generational shift within the Farmers’ League as a key factor for the coalition.
101 ”Folk high school” is an educational institution linking high school and college, which has played an important role in modern Scandinavian history. See Kayser Nielsen, Bonde, stat og hjem, pp. 276–283.
102 Schürer von Waldheim, Bondetåget från Malmöhus län, p. 122
cooperative movement picked up pace only after 1900. The move to dairy production in the 1870s and 1880s in response to the global fall of grain prices also led to nascent dairy cooperatives; the first was started in 1880 at the Hvilan folk high school, but the movement took off in the 1890s. The number of milk producers in the cooperatives grew from 40,000 in 1890 to 100,000 in 1914; at this time, cooperative dairies handled 68 per cent of the milk produced. Cooperative slaughterhouses grew in much the same way.\textsuperscript{104}

In the consumer cooperatives the workers and urban liberals were completely dominant until the 1910s. In 1910, 50 per cent of the members of Finnish consumer cooperatives were farmers, while in Denmark the figure was 73 per cent, but in Sweden it was only 8 per cent.\textsuperscript{105} If we see social capital and cooperative spirit as conducive to the formation of cooperatives\textsuperscript{106}, then we must confess that the Swedish farmers lagged behind the Danes in this respect. However, by the 1920s, the Swedish farmers were playing a key role in retail and producer cooperatives. At the same time, since the 1870s they had often been organized in free churches and temperance movements. In both these institutions, they had repeatedly found themselves in opposition to state power. The increased marketization and differentiation of the farmer class in the post-enclosure period of Swedish agriculture had finally been complemented by new social organizations and cohesions.\textsuperscript{107}

By the 1920s, Sweden was well on its way to a corporatist organization of agriculture: Rothstein portrays the milk policy under the Liberal government before the

\textsuperscript{104} Reine Rydén, “Att åka snålskjuts är icke hederligt”: De svenska jordbrukarnas organisationsprocess 1880-1947 (Gothenburg University, 1998), pp. 65–79.


\textsuperscript{107} Cf. on the new “popular movements” (temperance, free churches, and the labour movement) Sven Lundkvist, Folkrörelserna i det svenska samhället 1850-1920 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1977) and on the more general context, Bengtsson, “The Swedish Sonderweg”.
Depression as the “formative moment” of Swedish corporatism. In 1928, government agricultural policy was supporting organized farmer interests rather than laissez-faire capitalism. The Social Democratic–Farmers’ League policy after 1933 continued on this path. By 1938 the milk cooperatives controlled 91 per cent of the market, and the butcher cooperatives 65 per cent of their market; in 1980, 80 per cent of Swedish grain was produced by cooperative farms.

The political position of the farmers changed fundamentally as industry eroded the previously unthreatened position of agriculture as the nation’s economic backbone, and as the labor movement and the reformist urban liberals undermined the hegemony of estate owners and pushed through democratic reforms, especially in 1909 but in 1918 also. The ‘master of my domain’ (Herr im Haus) presumption embodied in the Country Party politics of the 1880s and 1890s was no longer tenable in the 1910s and 1920s – especially when one considers the economic and social fragmentation of the farmer class, and the large social stratum which by the 1920s combined small-scale agriculture with some degree of wage labor, such as seasonal (wintertime) work in forestry. It is significant that by the 1940s, corporatist agricultural policy was being formulated with the aim of guaranteeing smaller farmers – the majority of farmers – an economic standard comparable to that of an average male industrial worker.

The farmers were no longer the norm.

In this regard, it makes sense that in 1929 the first ‘trade union’ for farmers was founded, explicitly influenced by the Socialist trade unions for workers: Riksförbundet Landsbygdens Folk (RLF). The key aim at the outset was to collaborate as a producer cartel in

---

109 On milk: Morell, Jordbruket i industrisamhället, pp. 165-7; on grain: Osterman, 100 år av samverkan, p. 14.
110 Bo Persson, Skogens skördemän: Skogs- och flottningsarbetareförbundets kamp för arbete och kollektivavtal 1918-1927 (Lund: Arkiv, 1991); Rydén, Att äka snälskjuts, ch. 3
local markets and set common prices for produce; as is typical for farmers’ organizations, the
profits of middlemen and traders were among its main targets.112 The initiative came from the
relatively poor and egalitarian north, and was an explicit attempt to organize small farmers, as
distinct from the older, elite-dominated organizations. The background of the RLF’s founder
and first chairman, Viktor Johansson, is no coincidence. Johansson was a northern family
farmer in the and was a very active politician locally, for the more left-oriented of the two liberal
parties. He was also a driving force in the local dairy cooperative.113

The difference from the initiatives of the 1890s and 1910s is striking. The
Agrarförbund of the 1890s was an initiative by estate owners from the grain-producing plains
in the south of the country, and the Farmers’ March of 1914 was an initiative by estate owners,
merchants and capitalists from the wealthy areas around Stockholm. But the RLF initiative
came from the relatively poor and marginal north, and its founder, just like the Farmers’ League
leader Bramstorp, had a background in liberal party politics. Thus, while common explanations
of the democratic Swedish trajectory have stressed the continuities in farmer politics114, its
discontinuities were in fact sharp. Not organized by magnates from above, as the Country Party
was, the self-organizing and democratic farmer of the 1920s and 1930s should be seen as
deriving from the underestimated strength of Swedish Liberalism and renewed civil society of
the 1890s and early decades of the twentieth century.

112 e.g. Berger, Peasants against Politics; Sanders, Roots of Reform, pp. 179-184
113 On RLF generally and their difference to previous farmer organizations see Rydén, Att åka snålskjuts, pp. 120ff.
On Viktor Johansson see Per Thullberg, Bönder går samman: En studie i Riksförbundet Landsbygdens Folk under
114 e.g. Castles, “Barrington Moore’s Thesis”; Tilton, “Social Origins”; Esping-Andersen, Politics against
Markets.
7. Conclusions

The conventional wisdom is that the impetus to mould Swedish society in the twentieth century in a democratic and egalitarian fashion came from a relatively egalitarian and powerful farmer class. Either as a force in itself with deep roots in the social and political tradition of the country, or as a more modern movement, marked by independent organizations (rather than being subservient to the estate owners) and in the 1930s with an alliance between the Farmers’ League and the Social Democrats. Thus, in the comparative literature on the origins of political regimes, Sweden stands out as a paragon of stable and deeply rooted democracy.

The argument of this essay is that this conventional wisdom is misleading. Sweden in the decades around 1900 was a much more undemocratic and unequal society than is widely assumed, and farmer politicians in alliance with estate owners in the Country Party did very little to alleviate any of this inequality. The discontinuities of Swedish politics and economics in the first decades of the twentieth century are much more severe than has typically been appreciated. The behaviour of the Swedish farmers confounds expectations. The “farmer” MPs of the late 1800s, who were quite wealthy capitalist farmers with important side interests in other lines of business, had no problem in uniting first with estate owners in the Country Party and, after 1904, with those in the Conservative Party. Although even newer works tend to interpret the conservatism of the Riksdag farmers at the turn of the century as continuous, with historical agrarian skepticism towards experimentation and innovation, their conservatism should rather be seen as modern, capitalist Conservatism with a capital C.

116 On independent organizing, see Rueschemeyer et al., Capitalist Development. On the alliance, see Esping-Andersen, Politics against Markets; Luebbert, Liberalism, Fascism or Social Democracy, Ch. 8.
117 See also Bengtsson, ”The Swedish Sonderweg”.
118 Bengtsson and Olsson, “Peasant Aristocrats?”.
119 Bo Stråth, Union och demokrati: De förenade rikena Sverige-Norge 1814-1905 (Nora: Nya Doxa, 2005), p. 525
However, with the growth of Liberal and Socialist politics around 1900 and popular movements – teetotalism, free churches, and the labor movement – a counter-tendency also emerged. To go back to Rueschemeyer et al.’s analysis, “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.”120 Precisely this type of counter-hegemony developed in popular politics around 1900, in opposition to the very stale and exclusive official politics. This affected the farmers too. With folk high schools, cooperatives, farmers’ unions and in the end the Farmers’ League, the farmers did in the end organize themselves, escaping the leadership of estate owners, under such leaders as Bramstorp and Viktor Johansson who had been schooled in Liberal party politics. It is conventional to see twentieth-century Social Democracy as an epiphenomenon of an alleged egalitarian precedent in farmer society.121 The analysis here shows the opposite: it was the strength of popular movements – Liberalism, Social Democracy and Lib-Labism – in Swedish civil society that shaped a democratic farmer class.

Why did the Swedish farmers in the 1920s and 1930s change their political stance from conservatism to a more compromising line? What kind of “contingency” was in play here?122 And, which are the theoretical implications of this Swedish case study? I would argue as follows. The contextual factors which changed the stance of Swedish farmers to pro-democratic middle of the road politics were two. First, the economic: gradually from the 1870s onwards the socio-economic supremacy of farmers over workers was undermined by the striking productivity growth seen in the industrial sector. While farmers still in the 1880s or

120 Rueschemeyer et al., *Capitalist Development*, p. 50. On the broad pro-democratic alliance in Sweden see Hurd, *Public Spheres*.
121 Trägårdh, “Statist Individualism”; Bendixsen, Bringslid, and Vike, “Introduction”.
122 As in Capoccia and Ziblatt, “The Historical Turn”. For an interesting critical discussion of the discussion of contingency and politics in this paper, see Jørgen Møller, “When one might not see the wood for the trees: the ‘historical turn’ in democratization studies, critical junctures, and cross-case comparisons”, *Democratization*, 20, No. 4 (2013).
even 1890s could rule supreme in local politics in their rural municipalities along with a few noblemen, bourgeois families and persons of standing, in the safe knowledge that the proletariat was disenfranchised and needy, by the 1910s this was no longer the case. A significant minority of the farmers did express their dissatisfaction at this loss of status in reactionary ways – see the Farmers’ March and the marked prevalence of authoritarian and racist ideas in the Farmers’ League in its early years – but step by step, a more accommodating and humble stance became more attractive. This conversion in turn had to do with the second “contingent” factor: the massive popular organization of a vague opposition (often of Liberal or Social Democratic bent) in free churches, teetotalling organizations, the labour movement, folk high schools, etc. This spread new ideas and values in the broader population, and large swathes of the by the early twentieth century socio-economically levelled farming class were receptive for such ideas. The adoption of the strike from the labour movement as a political method is a striking example of this process. Thus, the analysis here supports the emphasis on contingency and on politics in the recent “historical turn” in democratization studies. In literatures following Barrington Moore’s influential *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, or the German *Sonderweg* debate, or less class-oriented and more culturally based theories of national political culture, Sweden has been seen as proof of persistence in politics. As demonstrated here, this view overstates the persistence of social structures and political traditions. But I do not agree with the criticism of Moore’s emphasis on class in the “historical turn”. Organized and concerted action rooted in class (capital, labour, farmers) fundamentally shaped Sweden’s democratization and road to a Social Democratic model. But classes cannot be ascribed transhistorical allegiances to ideologies or policies – ideology and policy change with the

---


35
circumstances.\textsuperscript{124} A social forces approach to Swedish democratization is as relevant as ever, but not with assumptions of unchanging social and ideological characteristics of the classes.

\textsuperscript{124} A point made well already by Blackbourn and Eley, \textit{The Peculiarities}, pp. 56–61.