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Sweden Before and After Social Democracy: A First Overview

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This is a first report on a research project entitled 'Sweden Under Social Democracy (1932–76)'. It aims at probing into the effects a uniquely long Social Democratic parliamentary reign have had on the present 'welfare state'. It is argued that a causal analysis such as this has to start from a historical study and that correlational methods have little value. Sweden is therefore compared with other Western societies before and at the end of the Social Democratic era, with a view to finding out in which areas and the degrees to which Sweden was different. Two alternative hypotheses are presented: (1) The Parliamentary Hypothesis, according to which societal development is determined by parliamentary politics and from which an increasing differentiation between Sweden and countries with other parliamentary configurations is to be expected; (2) The Class Hypothesis, according to which social development is determined by the extraparliamentary social forces reflected in parliamentary politics and reproduced rather than transformed by the latter, unless there is a rupture in the political institutions. Since no such rupture occurred in Sweden in 1932 nor after, from this hypothesis it could be expected that Sweden ought to have remained in about the same relation to other Western states. A first test is then made, with reference to aspects of the social conditions of the population, capital-labour relations, educational, social, and tax policies. No definite conclusions are reached, but the evidence casts reasonable doubt on the Parliamentary Hypothesis and indicates the fruitfulness of the Class Hypothesis as a guide to future explorations.

For forty-four years (with a brief summer vacation interlude in 1936), between 1932 and 1976, Sweden was governed by Social Democratic or Social Democratically led coalition governments. What has this long parliamentary reign meant for the development of Swedish society? There is, for example, wide international interest in the Swedish 'welfare state', in Swedish capital-labour and other social relations. How much of the present characteristics hereof is due to Social Democratic government?

This is the first paper on a collective research project, just started, on 'Sweden

Under Social Democracy'. The aim of the project is explanatory rather than descriptive. We are above all interested in answering the question: How are the changes and non-changes in Swedish society 1932–76 to be explained? What significance have the parliamentary situation and government policies had? How are these policies and this parliamentary situation themselves to be explained?

In this endeavour we are governed by an adherence to certain basic methodological rules. The causal analysis should be guided by contradictory hypotheses derived from systematic social theories. The study should be internationally comparative. The empirical investigation should be both qualitative and quantitative and, because of its comparative orientation, particular attention should be paid to the problem of the quality and comparability of sources.

The project should thus be relevant to general questions of explanatory social theory as well as to more specific questions, such as the reasons for the rise of so-called welfare states, and the significance and determinants of parliamentary politics. It is also pertinent to the political question of to what extent Sweden can be taken as a model of policy for other countries. The intention of the present paper is to provide a first, preliminary overview of Sweden in the world before and after Social Democracy with a view to getting some guidelines for further explorations in depth. The overview concentrates on three aspects of Sweden which have been very much in the foreground of the contemporary international discussion – the scientific as well as the ideological: the welfare state, egalitarian social relations and a high minimum standard of living, and the institutionalized capital-labour relations. We will deal with a number of indicators of the character of these aspects, but we do not claim to have covered even all the variables that we ourselves, at this stage, regard as the most important ones. For instance, due to limitations of time and other scarce resources, neither men-women relations, employment and work relations, nor the positions of big capital are treated here. We plan to do that in future reports.

The over-all question of this paper is: Is Sweden in the middle 1970s any different from or about the same distance to other Western countries as compared to the situation 1925–30? That is, is Sweden more of an egalitarian, harmonious welfare state after 44 years of Social Democratic government than before, compared with other states which have developed under different parliamentary auspices during the same period? To answer this simple question is, however, a very complicated task, involving tricky problems of selection of variables and indicators, of ensuring the comparability of reliable source materials, and of weighting the values found on the different indicators. We have to warn the reader from the outset against disappointment, this paper will not provide a straight and concluding answer.

What we hope to achieve are two things. Firstly, by trying to find, not one final answer but, several provisional answers to our overriding question, we want to test two hypotheses with regard to their likely fruitfulness as guides to future research.

(1) *The Parliamentary Hypothesis*. Societal development is determined by the constellation and struggle of forces in parliament, in particular by the kind of

parliamentary government (assuming a polity of parliamentary democracy). The uniquely long period of parliamentary government by, or led by, a single party with an explicit and wideranging political programme makes Sweden the strongest single case for the possible validity of this hypothesis. According to this hypothesis we should expect Sweden to have diverged increasingly from other Western states between 1932 and 1976 in the direction of more welfare and equality.

(2) *The Class Hypothesis*. Societal development is determined by the constellation and struggle of class forces, which have their base in the relations and forces of production. The class forces bear upon and are reflected in, among other things, parliament, but a decisive change in the relations between the classes is expressed in a rupture in the organization of the state, not *per se* by a change of government within an unchanged political system. The Social Democratic reign did not involve such a rupture in the polity. Consequently, according to the second hypothesis the Social Democratic era reflected and reproduced basically the same class relations as previous governments in the period of parliamentary democracy, and we should therefore expect Sweden in the middle 1970s to have been at about the same distance to other Western countries as in the 1920s.

Secondly, by raising the above-mentioned type of question and by placing it in the centre of our analysis we want to bring about a methodological reorientation of the prevailing discourse on comparative social conditions. The question asked here is basic to any kind of historical causal analysis, a time sequence has to be established before any meaningful discussion of cause and effect is possible. However, both in academic research and in ideological debate a correlational logic tends to replace an explanatory one. In the United States, in particular, there is a vast enterprise of correlating going on, more often geared to including as many countries as possible than to ensuring reliable and comparable statistical source materials (in the field of equality and welfare measures, e.g. Cutright 1965, 1967a, b; Galenson 1968; Hewitt 1977; Jackman 1974; Wilensky 1975). But the establishment of covariation cannot substitute for the search for causal mechanisms and causal time chains.¹ A similar, implicit correlational logic underlies much of the ideological discussion on the Swedish welfare state, both within and outside Sweden. From the covariation of the rise of modern social services, employment rates etc., with the reign of Social Democracy, it is often rashly concluded that the latter is the only major cause of the former.

What is here called the Parliamentary Hypothesis is a reformulation on a more general level of what is called the Social Democratic Hypothesis in one of the most sophisticated specimens of the correlational enterprise (Hewitt 1977). Formulating his hypothesis Hewitt explicitly refers to 'socialist' (meaning Social Democratic) governments, but in defining his independent variable he drops the government criterion for proportion of parliamentary seats in the post-war period. Our Class Hypothesis is derived from Marxist theory, which Hewitt mentions as a contrasting theory, to be dismissed on the basis of his evidence, without bothering to define it.

Hewitt found support for his Social Democratic Hypothesis in statistically significant correlations between on the one hand Social Democratic parliamentary strength and, on the other, government redistribution (defined as the quota of income taxes and of the sum of income and indirect taxes, multiplied by social service expenditure as percent of GNP), income shares of top 5 and 20%, and spread of labour force earnings. The correlations held also when controls were made for rate of economic growth and level of economic development. No attempt is made to spell out any causal mechanisms, and the possibility that the 'independent' and the 'dependent' variables can both be explained by a third type of variable, for example the pre-war class relations, is not considered.²

In the following we will first touch on a few aspects of direct manifestations of social class relations, indicators of the level of living, and of capital-labour relations (a section on the social character of the state organization has been omitted from this version due to lack of space); then we will go into their reflection in education, social, and taxation policies.

Social conditions of the population

Today the richest country in Europe and one of the richest in the world, Sweden a century ago was a relatively poor and archaic periphery of Western Europe. The crude measures of economic development and urbanization given in Table 1 illustrate this well.

Table 1. *Level of economic development and urbanization in some countries c. 1850.*

		Percentage of the population engaged in industry and services	Percentage of the population in cities
England & Wales	(1851)	84	50
Prussia	(1858)	60	28
Belgium	(1856)	50	26
France	(1856)	38	27
Sweden	(1855)	35	10
Italy	(1861)	30	

Source: Cipolla (1970), p. 75.

More detailed studies have also shown that, of the three Scandinavian countries, Sweden was by the late nineteenth century the one least developed, politically, and culturally (Kuhnle 1976), and economically less developed than Denmark (Jörberg & Krantz 1976).

The social conditions under which the mass of the Swedish population lived indicate, however, that Sweden was not an underdeveloped society but rather an

undeveloped society. It seems that the situation of the lower classes in nineteenth-century Sweden, grim and miserable as it was, was rather better than in most of the more advanced countries. One indicator is the demographic statistics of infant mortality rates, of which there exist long historical series and which have a relatively high reliability and international comparability (Table 2).

Table 2. *Deaths of infants under one year old per 1000 live births.*

Yearly average	Country														
	AUSA ^(a)	B	DK	SF	F	D	I	NL	NZ	N	S	CH	GB ^(b)	USA	
1840s	—	246	155	144	—	160	298 ^(c)	—	182	—	119	154	—	153	—
1880s	—	249	161	137	—	167	228	198	183	—	98	112	—	142	—
1920s	57	156	105	83	94	101	112	124	66	41	52	60	63	72	73
1970–74	17 ^(d)	25	18	13 ^(d)	10	17 ^(d)	23 ^(e)	27	12	16	12	10	14	17	18

(a) Before 1918 Cisleithania except Dalmatia, Lombardy and Venetia.

(b) England and Wales. From the time of available statistics, 1855 to 1912, the Scottish figures are somewhat lower, afterwards somewhat higher.

(c) Bavaria, which had higher figures than the unified Reich, as later figures indicate.

(d) 1970–73.

(e) GFR. The GDR figures were higher in the 1950s and in the first half of the 1960s, then the situation was reversed, and the life of infants became considerably less dangerous in East than in West Germany. The GDR figure for 1970–74 is 17.

Sources: *European Historical Statistics* (1975), *Annuaire Statistique Belgique 1929–30* (for Australian and New Zealand figures of the 1920s), *The Statistical History of the United States* (1965), *Demographic Yearbook* (1974, 1975).

In the first decade for which European comparable data are available, the 1840s, Sweden is on a par with the most developed nations. By the time industrialization takes off in Sweden, Swedish infants are entering a considerably less cruel and dangerous world than their brothers and sisters in the societies of more advanced capitalism. No clear pattern of either divergence or convergence after the decades of Social Democratic reign in Sweden emerges, particularly when the naturally asymptotic character of the declining curve is taken into account.

The lower classes in middle nineteenth-century Sweden, and in the other Nordic countries, had another asset that was much more scarce in other countries. They had literacy (Table 3). Long before a formal state system of popular education had been set up, the Lutheran clergymen had spread the ability to read to the overwhelming majority of the population. (Prior to the school system the ability to write, more than one's name, was much more limited) (Johansson 1977).

Table 3. *Per cent adult illiterates in Europe around 1850.*

Sweden and other Nordic countries	<10
Germany, Scotland, Netherlands, Switzerland	<20
England, Wales	25–35
France, Belgium	40–45
Austria–Hungary	60–70
Spain, Italy	70–80

Source: Johansson (1977), p. 79.

Thus, by mid-nineteenth century, before the rise of industrial capitalism and the labour movement, the floor of the misery of the lower classes was considerably higher than in most other Western countries, a floor which should be kept in mind as a base for later take-offs.

Capital-labour relations

The famous Swedish institutionalized labour market relations, expressed in the main agreement at Saltsjöbaden in 1938, are impossible to understand without considering the historical situation preceding the Social Democratic government take over.³ A pattern of collective bargaining and general agreements were established in Sweden soon after the turn of the century.

To catch the development, two aspects must be considered. Firstly, the legal rights to organize in unions and to strike, and secondly, and more importantly, employers' attitudes to the labour movement. Sweden was in these two respects rather unique. Let us first look at the legal situation.

In contrast to all other countries, Sweden never had any legislation prohibiting union organization and strikes after the establishment of bourgeois economic and social relations, with the abolition of guild regulations in 1864.⁴ Most other countries had legal limitations at a corresponding stage of industrial development. In Britain unions became legal in 1824, but about the turn of the century the unions were pressed by a series of injunctions, which were not legally removed until 1906. In the USA injunctions were used about 10,000 times until 1932, when the Norris-La Guardia Act put an end to them (Rimlinger 1977:217). The Netherlands and Belgium did not concede the right to strike until 1872 and 1886 respectively (Kendall 1975:14). In France the right to organize was not definitely recognized until 1884 (Braun 1950:27, 40). In the German area a period of toleration began in the 1860s, but it was interrupted by the Law Against Socialists 1878–1890.⁵ In Denmark the International, which was important for the unions, was forbidden after 1872.

With respect to the second aspect – the employers' early acceptance of trade unions and collective bargaining – the only European countries that can be compared with Sweden are Denmark, Norway and the UK where a collective bargaining system was established before 1910. In Sweden, the Engineering Agreement of

1905 and the December Compromise of 1906 meant among other things that the employers recognized the workers' right to organize. At the same time, big industry accepted the principle of collective bargaining. This was manifested in a wave of collective agreements 1906–1907. In 1908 they included about 45% of workers in factory industry (*Arbetsstatistik A:5 I*, 1910:36–37). The Danish September Compromise of 1899 between the Employers' Confederation and the Confederation of Trade Unions, was the first main agreement in the world. In Norway no collective agreements within industry existed before 1902, when a central agreement of voluntary arbitration was achieved. Since 1905 collective agreements have been in general practice in industry, and in 1907 a national agreement for the engineering industry was established. This contained detailed regulations about mediation and arbitration (*Fackföreningsrörelsen II*, 1912:33–37). In the UK some national agreements on the procedure to deal with disputes were reached in the 1890s, e.g. in the engineering industry in 1898 (Pelling 1963:121). By 1910 national agreements had been signed by the trade unions and the employers' federations in a series of industries (Clegg *et al.* 1964:471).

The Scandinavian national agreements were brought about by central employers' organizations and confederations of trade unions. The employers' confederations there were together with their German equivalents among the most centralized in the world. However, centralized employers' organizations do not by themselves lead to the establishment of a collective bargaining system, which the German case shows. Only about 10% of the German workers were affected by collective agreements at the end of 1909 (*Arbetsstatistik A:5 III*, 1911:10). Hardly any of these were to be found in big industry. Big industrialists strongly opposed collective agreements and trade unions (Saul 1974). This is sharply contrasted by the Swedish situation, where the extension of collective agreements was largest in big industry (*Arbetsstatistik A:5 III*, 1911:38). Within mechanical engineering industry they covered as much as 68% of the workers (*ibid.*, p. 297). In the rest of Continental Europe collective bargaining was for a long time undeveloped. In the USA big companies did not recognize trade unions until the 1930s.

Employers' recognition of trade unions as bargaining partners is also affected by the strength of the unions. The early recognition in Scandinavia and the UK can partly be attributed to the fact that union membership was substantial in these countries. In Denmark half of the workers were organized as early as 1905. Sweden and the UK came in second place with about one fourth organized; Germany had about one fifth. Norway is clearly lagging behind in 1905, but by 1908 had attained about 30% of the workers organized.⁶ For France, Belgium, Italy, the Netherlands and the USA the share was limited to between one seventh and one tenth.⁷

The recognition of bargaining rights was won in battle by unions which successfully resisted massive lockouts (UK 1898, Denmark 1899, Sweden 1903, 1905).

That the collective bargaining system was not established without struggle is also confirmed by strike statistics (Table 4). In the first thirty years of the century Northern European and British strikes were characterized by their long duration. They were more of endurance contests than was the case in the rest of Europe.

This indicates big trials of strength between well organized workers and employers in Scandinavia and the UK. Swedish strikes continued to be very long until the 1950s (Shorter and Tilly 1974: 312–333.) Before 1920, Sweden like many other countries had a high strike rate, which markedly differs from later periods. The shift in Sweden to a lower strike rate starts in the 1920s. The relative number of strikers per year is probably the best simple measure of the spread of industrial conflict.

Table 4. *Number of strikers per 1000 workers and employees, averages for 1920–29 and 1966–75.*

	Aus- tria	Bel- gium	Den- mark	France	Ger- many	Hol- land	Italy	Swe- den	UK
1920–29(c) (A)	67	47	22	31	64	16	–	52	57
1966–75(d) (B)	10	20(a)	37	146(b)	7(e)	5	408	6	63
change (B)–(A)	–57	–27	+15	+115	–57	–11	–	–46	+6

(a) 1966–74; (b) 1968 is missing; (c) number of workers and employees c. 1930; (d) salaried and wage workers c. 1970; (e) West Germany.

Sources: Calculations from *European Historical Statistics*, 1975, *Yearbook of Labour Statistics*, 1937 – Table II, 1976 – Table A2 and Table 27.

Austria and Germany have a larger decline in the relative number of strikers than Sweden. The Swedish development is undoubtedly connected to centralized capital-labour relations. Each small conflict is easily escalated to far-reaching battles, which neither of the partners can control. In this respect Sweden differs from most countries where the form of bargaining is more decentralized. The explanation of the Swedish centralization of the trade unions is to be found both in the fact that the Employers' Confederation was strongly centralized, which had to be met by centralized unions, and also by the fact that the unions were organized as industrial federations. This can be traced back to the rapid industrialization in Sweden and the weak craft traditions.

Educational system and policy

By mid-nineteenth century Sweden had an educational system that was remarkably egalitarian in relative terms.

On the one hand there was nearly universal literacy, on the other the system of higher education catering to the upper classes was rather limited and non-distinguished. There were few prestigious elite private secondary schools, like the English 'public schools', there was no Oxbridge and no *grandes écoles*.

The Swedish law of 1842, which, in spite of escape clauses, laid the basis for free and compulsory primary education came after similar, or rather more comprehensive, educational laws in several German states and in Denmark (1814), but anticipated the most nearly corresponding legislations in Belgium (1848), Britain (1870) and France (1882) (Sjöstedt-Sjöstrand 1969).

Egalitarian in nineteenth century relative terms of course meant a highly inequalitarian system by contemporary standards. Already from the level of primary education there were in fact different schools for different social classes preparing for rather different levels in society.

One of the first tasks of educational reform after the establishment of public primary schooling was therefore to create a unified system of primary education. The first initiatives in this direction were taken by Liberals in the 1880s, and in this struggle they were soon able to form an alliance with the workers movement, which was under dynamic growth in the last decades of the century. This is very important because already here a coalition was formed that later (especially after 1945) became the dominant force in Swedish educational policy.

Partial reforms towards unification were passed in the 1890s and in the first decade of the twentieth century, and in 1928 Sweden legislated a comprehensive system of education on primary level, in that secondary education was to start after at least four years of common primary schooling. This was decades earlier than in Britain and France, but considerably later than similar laws passed in Denmark (1903), Germany (1919), and Norway (1920) (Brubacher 1966; Sjöstedt-Sjöstrand 1969).

Let us now turn to what has happened during the reign of Social Democracy. In a broad perspective, two things basically. The tendency towards a wholly comprehensive system of education has continued and developed an almost totally integrated education on primary and secondary levels. The differentiation starts after nine years of schooling, but mechanisms built into the various lines in the secondary schools, and an expanded and flexible system of recurrent labour-force training, make it relatively easy for individuals to change as well direction in their secondary education as occupation.

Tertiary education, for long lagging in Sweden, has expanded very rapidly in the 1960s. The latest phase in the development of comprehensiveness, the unified system of tertiary education, has recently come into practice (from 1.7.77). This system, organizationally unifying all tertiary academic and vocational education, is rather similar to the old US college system, however, with two important differences. Sweden has never had the ranking differentiation of universities and other academic institutions, nor entrance examinations to the tertiary level.

Valid and reliable comparative measures of characteristics of educational systems are hard to find. However, classifications of a number of countries on some commonly studied variables conventionally considered as important reveal that the Swedish educational system appears considerably less elitist and competitive in structure than most Western systems.

Sweden has few private schools, compared to a relatively high proportion in

Britain, the USA, the Netherlands, and Belgium, and to a medium rank of West Germany and France (Passow 1976). In Sweden there is a fairly even distribution of resources, both in terms of quality and quantity, among the different units of the compulsory school system, whereas there is an elitist allocation of resources in Britain, West Germany, and the USA, with France and the Netherlands this time occupying an intermediary position (Noonan 1976). Differentiation of pupils going to secondary education takes place late in Sweden, at the age of 16, compared to 10 in West Germany, 11 in England, France, and the Netherlands, and to 12 in the USA. Sweden is also unique in having no entrance examinations to higher education (Passow 1976).

Several aspects of the structure have very old roots: the general diffusion of basic level of education (the ability to read and write, elementary arithmetic, etc.), the insignificance of private elite secondary schools, the absence of specific top elite institutions at tertiary level, and the absence of entrance examinations to higher education. Others have been more recent developments: the long comprehensive compulsory schooling, the development of a homogeneous and 'equalizing' secondary level, the institutional integration of academic and more directly vocational tertiary education. This last development, however, had long been pioneered in the United States, and whether the former should be seen more as an effect of the parliamentary situation than the extraordinary increase of national wealth coming on top of the older comprehensive tradition remains to be investigated.

How effective has this educational structure been in practice? One way of looking at the problem may be to consider the effects on the distribution of the benefits of the expansion of higher education among the different classes. Because of the difficulty in obtaining reliable international data for comparison we will at present have to confine ourselves to Swedish research. (Crude rates of social recruitment of students for example has little meaning given the hierarchy of institutions which is very important in some countries, and more generally because of the very different kinds of tertiary education leading to quite different positions on the labour market.)

Recent research points out that differences between social classes in recruitment and examination rates at the university level are still striking. More than one third of children from the upper classes continue studies until they receive an academic degree, compared with only 4% of the working class. If one looks at the more prestigious tertiary professional educations leading to highly paid professional positions (law, medicine, dentistry), the corresponding figures are 8% and 0.4% respectively (Svensson 1977).

The effects of the relatively egalitarian Swedish school system on social recruitment to higher education appear to have been remarkably limited. In fact, the rapid expansion of the latter in the 1960s has more benefited the sons and daughters of other classes than those of the working class. According to the calculations of Bengt Gesser, later checked and confirmed, freshmen from working-class homes increased by about 5000 between 1953 and 1968, a change of from 1% to 9% of

working-class twenty-year-olds, while the new university students from families of other classes increased by about 18,000, from 9% to 33% of the twenty-year-olds with this social background (Gesser 1976:27). The basic forces generating and reproducing inequality seem to have been considerably stronger than political will to educational reform and equality.

Social policy and system of taxation

In the field of social legislation Sweden was behind most countries on the European continent at the beginning of the century. In terms of first social security laws introduced, the situation before World War I was that countries like Germany, Denmark, Norway, Austria and the UK were well advanced. On some points this was also the case for Australia and New Zealand, where accident insurance and old age pension legislation came very early. In the inter-war period the Netherlands and France developed social insurance mainly by legislation of sickness insurance and family allowances (1930 and 1928 respectively). The delay in comprehensive insurance programmes in Sweden is connected with the way such programmes were enforced. Both Sweden and Denmark dissented from the German pattern of compulsory state programmes and instead supported a system of voluntary funds, which had been built up since the middle nineteenth century. The extremely late introduction in Sweden of unemployment insurance (1934) was also created along the lines of voluntary union-administered and state supported funds. The scheme was called the Ghent system, introduced in the Belgian city as early as 1901. The liberal British unemployment system from 1911, which was both individually comprehensive and covered larger parts of the population, did not influence the Swedish legislation.

By the beginning of the social democratic period in 1932 Sweden was still lagging behind Germany, Denmark and the UK. On the other hand, she was ahead of Norway, Finland and the non-European countries. (For years when introduction of social legislation in different countries took place, see Gilbert (1970), Höjer (1952), Kaim-Caudle (1973), Kewley (1965), Nelson (ed.) (1953), Rimlinger (1971).)

The Beveridge plan of 1942 introduced to Britain the most comprehensive national minimum benefit system of the time; similar plans were developed just after the war on the European continent. The Swedish insurance system, however, was delayed and it took until the middle 1950s before a compulsory sickness insurance system was created. The level of old age pensions and the introduction of family allowances just after the war, were both parts of the early social democratic programme which had some impact on the state of social security in the 1940s (Myrdal & Myrdal 1934).

Apart from changes in the level of benefit, the only important new system in social security has been the introduction of a second layer of earnings-related pensions, arguably the key question of the social democratic programme of the 1950s (Molin 1965). This debate, however, is by no means exclusive to Swedish

Social Democracy. A new pension scheme along the same lines was introduced in Germany in the same year as in Sweden (1957), and in 1959 the conservative British government introduced a similar system (Rimlinger 1971:153, 178). (None of the latter, however, involved the establishment of collective funds, which constituted the Swedish mode of finance.)

Together with political system, ideology and similar factors, quite a few analyses of growth and social policy have emphasized factors such as level of economic development or growth rate as important causal variables. There are two possible ways of looking into this problem: one would be to consider the amount of gross national product that goes into social services (Table 5) and the other to look at the amount of governmental spending that is deducted from social services. We will look at the two in turn.

Table 5. *Social service expenditure as percentage of GNP, selected years and countries.*

	1913	1932	1938	1949	1954	1960	1965	1970
Australia				7	8	8	8.5	9
Austria				14	17	15.5	17.5	19
Canada		8	7	7	9	9	9.5	13.5
Denmark				9	11	11	12	16.5
Finland				9	10	9	10.5	13
France				13.5	18.5	13	15.5	14.5
Germany(a)	5	23.5	–	17	19	15.5	16.5	17
Netherlands	–	10.5	8.5	8.5	9.5	11	15.5	20
Norway				8.5	9	9.5	11	15
New Zealand				15	12.5	13	11.5	11.5
Sweden	3.5	9.5	9.5	11.5	11.5	11	13.8	19
UK	4	12.5	11	11	10.5	11	12	14
USA	2	6	6.5	5	5.5	7	7	9.5

(a) After 1945 West Germany.

Sources: Before 1949 calculated from Forsman (1977:30 ff.) and Musgrave (1969); 1949 and after from 'The Cost of Social Security', ILO, 1952, 1958, 1976.

The picture becomes very complex, with cases of slow, rapid, steady, and uneven growth, of alternating periods of growth and relative decline, and of general post-war decline (New Zealand). Sweden belongs to the growth countries, but not in any spectacular way. Nothing very dramatic happened after 1932, and by 1965 Sweden occupied a middle position among the most advanced capitalist countries. Then there was a big jump – due above all to the expansion of health services – which landed Sweden on the second rung. By 1970 Sweden had reversed her relationship to Germany (the figures are exceptionally high in 1932 because of the drastic fall of GNP in the Depression) and to the UK, increased the distance to the USA, but had maintained about the same distance to the Netherlands.

The Swedish state has for long devoted a relatively large part of its budget to social services of various kinds. By 1890 about a third of Swedish public expenditure was going to social services, as compared to between one fifth and one fourth in the UK and the USA, to less than a tenth in France, and to a third in Germany in 1913 (Forsman 1977:36). In 1932 the proportion in Sweden was about 45%, which thirty years later, when Forsman's series ends, after a post-war period of growth, had increased to 50%.

Another, more qualitative aspect of the development of social policy is to look at information about the level or coverage of social security benefits in the different countries. In this way one avoids the risk of social security spending being given to limited parts of the population or at very limited levels. One such attempt to compile an indicator which takes coverage into account is that by Flora presented in Table 6 (Flora 1976:25 ff.).

Table 6. *Flora index of social security coverage 1900–1970.*^(a)

	1900	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	Change 1930–1970
Finland	0	4	5	40	49	63	107	+102
Denmark	10	30	38	87	87	88	90	+ 52
UK	0	60	75	87	102	100	98	+ 23
Austria	5	22	42	42	57	79	88	+ 46
Holland	0	25	38	42	45	105	108	+ 70
Sweden	0	60	60	65	77	117	122	+ 62
Norway	2	27	15	90	95	130	125	+110
France	4	7	10	32	52	75	89	+ 79
Germany ^(b)	40	45	60	60	70	80	84	+ 24

(a) Cumulated and weighted percentage of labour force covered. Old age pensions weighted by 1.5, sickness and unemployment insurance by 1.0, occupational accident insurance by 0.5. Percentage coverage by subsidized voluntary systems divided by 2.0.

(b) After 1945 West Germany.

Source: Flora (1976), p. 27.

Table 6 gives a somewhat different picture from the ones we have presented earlier. The coverage was very high already in the 1920s in Sweden as compared to other countries, and Sweden was in the lead even in 1970. Taken as a measure of the degree of democracy, or equality of distribution, this would mean that the Swedish welfare system has a very long tradition, which has not been changed dramatically in the social democratic era. We might also point at the rather high increase between 1950 and 1960, which has to do with the enforcement of the new social security act.

The difference between social security coverage and public expenditure (Tables 5 and 6) indicates that the economic importance of a full cover system might be rather limited. Thus, the high cover system in Sweden was established before 1960,

while its costs did not show up until 1970; figures for Austria and Denmark are rather high in 1970 on costs but not on coverage, while the opposite is true for Norway.

Social expenditure by the state of course has to be financed, and the way this is done affects the degree of economic equality and inequality. One crude measure of the redistributive effect of systems of taxation amenable to international comparison, is the ratio of individual income taxes and indirect taxes (including excises and customs duties). The former are generally progressive and the latter generally regressive; it is a very crude measure, however, because there may be considerable differences in the degree of each, differences not affecting the ratio. Only when there is a fairly large divergence among ratios can this be interpreted as an indicator of taxation systems with different redistributive effects. These effects, whether progressive or regressive, vary in significance according to the total load of income and indirect taxes. The tax load can be measured in terms of percentage of GNP. Out of these considerations we have tabulated in Table 7 estimates both of the redistributive effect of the tax system and of the size of this effect. The latter should be read with extra precaution, however, the margins of error in the first estimate are multiplied.

Table 7. *Redistributive effects of tax systems in Europe and the USA (1913–1969).*

	Individual income taxes (A)			$\frac{A}{B} \times$	Sum of A and B	%
	Indirect taxes (B)			B	GNP	
	1913	1929	1961	1969	1929	1969
Denmark	0.9	1.4	—	0.8	10	24
Norway	—	1.4	—	0.9	17	24
Sweden	1.9	1.0	1.6	1.6(a)	8	47
UK	0.6	1.1	1.0	1.0	12	22
Netherlands	0.4	0.49	0.9	1.3	8	27
Germany	1.0	0.9	0.6	0.7	10	20
Belgium	0(b)	0.1(f)	—	0.7(c)	—	—
France	0.1	0.2	0.3	0.3	2(d)(e)	5
Italy	0(b)	0.1(f)	0.2	0.4	1(f)	7
USA	—	—	1.5	1.7(a)	—	28

(a) 1968. (b) No income taxes existed. (c) Not completely comparable to the other figures because of uncertainty in the calculation of individual income taxes. (d) Not completely comparable because NI has been calculated from indices on both NI and prices. (e) NI and GNP used. (f) 1927.

Sources: For 1913 and 1927, SOU 1936:18 pp. 174 ff.; for 1961, Musgrave (1969), p. 172; and for 1969, Mennel (1971), p. 209; GNP figures for 1913, 1929 and 1961 from *The Fontana Economic History of Europe 6* (I and II), (1976), pp. 743–747, p. 86 and p. 722.

Note of caution: The individual income taxes/indirect taxes ratio only indicates different degrees of progressiveness and regressiveness, but it cannot be said that a ratio below 1 is necessarily regressive, because the progressive effects of the income tax might be stronger than the regressive effect of the indirect taxation.

Two things stand out from Table 7. Firstly, from very early on Sweden had a progressive system of taxation markedly different from that of Belgium, France or Italy. Its progressive character is even more obvious when the pattern of progression in direct taxes is taken into account. Thus, a detailed comparison of British and Swedish tax structures in 1934–35 shows a steady increase in progressiveness in the Swedish tax rates but a J-shaped curve of the British tax load (SOU 1936:18, pp. 54, 118 ff.). Secondly, the amount of taxation has changed rather drastically. In 1969 it was highest in Sweden, whereas prior to the Social Democratic era it was lower than in the other Northern European countries. In this respect there is a clear divergence of Sweden over the last four decades. This is likely to have been significantly affected by the government. How much is not clear, however. To what extent, for example, is it also due to the relatively crisis-free post-war expansion of the Swedish economy, which left Sweden unexposed to the harsh demands of cuts in public spending by the IMF and the World Bank as conditions for foreign credits? It should also be remembered that Norway, with a different tax development, was also governed by Social Democrats from 1935–40 and in the post-war period.

To summarize: In introducing social insurance legislation Sweden lagged behind the most advanced countries, Germany, Denmark, and Britain in particular. Neither has Sweden in later periods been a pioneer in social security legislation. But Sweden has had a long tradition of allocating a large part of public expenditure to social services and of having a comprehensive coverage of her social insurance schemes, when introduced. With increasing public spending and increasing national income a developed and extensive but not exceptional welfare system has ensued.

Income distribution

The first thing which has to be said about the over-all distribution of income is that the difficulties of establishing an acceptable basis of international comparability are still largely unsolved, and too often just ignored. The various measures of distribution – Lorenz curves, Gini indices, maximum equalization coefficients, income shares of various percentile and deciles of income earners – all refer to relations between two universes which are hardly ever the same in the national statistics of two or more countries – the universe of income earners and the universe of incomes. This is a problem not only in the most blatant cases – which nevertheless have not discouraged some daring or, rather, foolhardy scholars from computing apparently exact measures of distribution (e.g. Paukers 1973) – of countries with large subsistence sectors, poor statistical offices, and public secrets of massive tax assessment evasion.

The relationship between the universes of income earners and incomes is, of course, always affected by the criteria for statistical inclusion in them. These criteria are usually determined by the various national taxation laws, national census formats or specific national income surveys. Hereby quite different univer-

ses of incomes and income earners are established. Therefore, what international comparisons most often say is little more than that, e.g., the top 5% of a particular set of income recipients in country A receive x% of a particular sum of incomes in that country, and that the top 5% of another set of income recipients in country B get z% of a particular sum of incomes in country B, and so on. These kinds of comparison have a rather limited meaning. Generally speaking, the lower the threshold for inclusion into the universe of income earners, the higher the statistical measure of inequality. And a universe of household recipients tends to figure as less unequal than one of individuals.⁸

While a formulation in figures would thus be misleadingly exact, it seems that Sweden in the mid-1970s, together with Norway, had the most egalitarian distribution of income in the West, particularly after tax (Schnitzer 1974; Uusitalo 1975). This is also the case when the incomes of business executives are compared to those of workers. Various management consultants and centres have made studies of this, which have appeared, in part, in the business press. Thus, according to one estimate, the after tax income of a big business (average sales £90m.) executive in France compared to that of an average French wage worker in 1975 was 22:1, while it was 5.7:1 in Britain and 4.7:1 in Sweden (*Vision*, Febr. 1976). From another estimate it appears that Sweden and Norway are very similar, whereas Denmark and Finland resemble more the UK; the Netherlands, West Germany and Switzerland more approach the French situation (*Veckans Affärer*, No. 15, 1974).

How and when did this relatively egalitarian distribution in Sweden come about? Answer: we do not really know yet.

Here a myth has to be exploded, a myth created by the US economist Robert Solow in 1960, repeated by Wilensky (1975:73) and by Hewitt (1977:462n): 'Sweden started in 1935 with the most unequal of any we have recorded (i.e. Netherlands, Sweden, UK, West Germany) and wound up in 1954 with one of the least unequal' (Solow 1960:113). This is a completely unwarranted conclusion, because the universes of incomes and of income recipients are quite dissimilar. The Swedish figures originate from Bentzel (1953), whose very careful study has about a 100% coverage of total personal income and of adults, whereas the statistics for the other countries cover only between 79% and 86% of the income and between 80% and 98% of the income units. These figures are all there with detailed comments in Solow's source, *Economic Survey of Europe in 1956* (Ch. IX, p. 3). Kuhnle's (1976) historical comparisons of the income distribution in the Nordic countries are likewise inconclusive, as they are based on different universes of income earners and incomes.

However, the development of pre-tax income distribution in Sweden over the last four decades has followed an international pattern. An important shift towards equality took place from the late 1930s to the late 1940s (Bentzel 1953). This development stopped in the 1950s, and for men in active age also in the 1960s, but an over-all equalization started again in the latter decade due to the increasing employment of women (Spånt 1976:104). The ratio of wages to income generated in industry – in Marx's value terms $v/s + v$ – also increased between the late 1930s and

the late 1940s and then vacillated around the same figure up to 1960 (Phelps Brown 1968, Appendix 3). An important redistribution of income occurs through taxation and social expenditure, but they still leave three fourths of the total pre-tax inequality intact (Spånt 1976:209).

Inequality generating mechanisms similar to those in other Western countries seem to have operated in Social Democratic Sweden, but it is likely that the Swedish parliamentary situation has meant significant redistributive effects via taxation.

In lieu of conclusions

The reader was warned earlier in this article that no definite answers would be provided as reader's award. What we can say at this point is the following: The contemporary Swedish 'welfare state' seems to have very old roots, at least in some respects, long ante-dating a significant Social Democratic parliamentary presence. Our findings cast reasonable doubt on the Parliamentary Hypothesis, at the hypothesis of the decisive importance of four decades of Social Democratic government. Instead they tend to support the Class Hypothesis, the determinant influence of previous class relations of force reproduced rather than fundamentally transformed by the parliamentary situation after 1932. Our results also point to the serious deficiency of correlational logic in the task of explaining the rise of social patterns, and to the urgent necessity for a much more critical approach to the problems connected with ensuring reliable and internationally comparable data than has been common so far, particularly in US correlational enterprises in the areas under review.

However, the severe limitations of the presented overview should also be made explicit. We cannot claim to have established the Class Hypothesis as a thesis beyond reasonable doubt, rather we have shown it to be worthy of further exploration. There are important aspects of Swedish society untouched by this report, e.g. the structure and development of Swedish capitalism, the accumulation and concentration of capital, etc. Important dimensions of welfare to which no attention has been paid include employment, conditions of work, and male-female relations. As regards the questions we have covered, we cannot lay claim to have exhausted all crucial indicators. There are, furthermore, some indicators which we have not been able to grasp due to the still unsolved problems of ensuring international comparability. This is particularly the case with historical statistics of income and wealth distribution. All this makes us fully agree with the classical conclusion of scientific treatises: More research is needed.

The qualifications mentioned above are all limitations of this particular report as an example of one form of study. It will also be necessary to go beyond this research format. This is basically a kind of comparative study comparing the Swedish situation with that of other countries in two different periods. A qualitatively new step would be to go into the mechanisms of the causal dynamics, disentangling the forces and processes which took place in Sweden and the other

countries during the transition from the first to the second period of time.

Finally, we will point briefly at three dimensions of the dynamics which are vital from the outset. One is the national economy and its location in the international economic system. Given a particular set of social relations it is reasonable to assume that economic growth – development of the resources available – is an important part of the process determining the extension, stagnation and contraction of social services. In this respect Sweden stands out as absolutely unique in the growth of national product per capita over the last century (Table 8).

Table 8. *National product per capita 1960. Index 1860 = 100.*

Belgium	308	Sweden	804
Denmark	447	Switzerland	343
France	356	UK	253
Netherlands	235	USA	398
Norway	460	Canada	344
Germany(a)	345	Japan	655
Italy	306		

(a) After 1945, West Germany.

Source: Kuznets (1964), pp. 138–139.

Early estimates of the national product in largely agricultural societies, of course, contain considerable margins of error, but the distance between Sweden and other countries is so great that her top rank cannot conceivably be challenged. By 1938, that is, prior to the post-war wave of major social reforms, Sweden seems to have reached the position of having, along with the UK, the highest per capita income in Europe, and by 1950 Sweden, having been spared of the holocausts of World War II, was quite definitely in the lead (Bunte & Jörberg 1977: Table 59). There appears to be little reason for thinking that this striking economic performance had very much to do with the specific post-1932 parliamentary configuration.⁹

Another dimension which appears to have been important, but which is much more difficult to grasp, is the impact of international political conjunctures. There is a striking coincidence in time between the major Social Democratic thrusts forward in Sweden and international waves of political radicalization. At least three, possibly four such periods can be distinguished. Firstly, the advances of the middle 1930s, centring on commitment to an expansive economic policy of employment and agricultural support, which had its close equivalents in the other Scandinavian countries and coexisted with the French Popular Front and the American New Deal. In the budget bill of 1938 the government signalled a halt in further attempts at social reform, and in the autumn of the same year leading spokesmen of the government invited big business to cooperate in the supposed common interests of capital and labour.

After the turning-point of World War II Swedish Social Democracy radicalized again. As part of international post-war radicalization new schemes for progressive taxation, expanded social services, government regulation of industry, etc., were put forward. From 1948, if not earlier, there followed new attempts at depolarization and at close cooperation with big business. Again, in the latter half of the 1960s attempts at a new advance were made under the main slogan 'increased equality'. A minor offensive period might possibly be located in 1957–62 around the conflict about a second layer pensions scheme, though the political shifts in this period might also be seen as above all due to the inept handling of the issue by the then major opposition party, the Liberals, rather than as a deliberate over-all Social Democratic thrust forward.

Now, the tendencies and conflicts of these international political conjunctures operate and are fought out in specific national contexts and often yield very different outcomes. In spite of the radicalization of the working-class there too, the conflicts of the thirties in the UK split the Labour Party, resulting in a Conservative régime, and led in Germany to the victory of Fascism. A third basic dimension of the social dynamics, then, is the national constellation of social forces in which the international conjunctures of revolution, reform, conservation and reaction are acted out. To explain what happened in Sweden under Social Democracy it will be necessary to probe into the causes of the Social Democratic offensives, and of their stopping, but without loss of office till 1976.

From a social scientific point of view this is not a task of narrative historiography but a question of whether and to what extent the development of a society, and the role played by parliamentary politics and extra-parliamentary social forces herein, is graspable by any of the basic patterns of social determination discovered-produced by social science. In other words, appropriately ending this article with a question mark: Does Sweden under Social Democracy belie the classical traditions of social scientific determinism, and, if not, what theory can best explain what happened?

Notes

- 1 A similar point is made by, e.g., Carrier & Kendall (1977:281). There also exist a number of studies of a quite different type, Flora (1976), Kaim-Caudle (1973), and Rimlinger (1971).
2. The tricky problem of internationally comparable statistics on income distribution is cavalierly treated by Hewitt, and his article contains some other technical curiosities. Thus the USA is counted twice – as a whole and as one part of it (Puerto Rico) – and South Africa, where the degree of Social Democratic parliamentary representation seems to be far less significant than the fact that the overwhelming majority of the population is excluded from any legal political participation, is also included. Since no distinction is made between Social Democratic governments and strong parliamentary oppositions, there is a doubtful rationale for exclusion of Communist parties, the parliamentary strength of which might have similar effects on government policies. If they were included the score on the independent variable, socialist parliamentary strength, would be significantly higher for Finland, France, and Italy. All this seems to go in one direction, towards the strengthening of Hewitt's correlations (Hewitt 1977).

- 3 The agreement was made between the Swedish Confederation of Trade Unions (LO) and the Employers' Confederation (SAF), and contains detailed regulations of collective bargaining.
- 4 Exceptions of minor importance were the Statute of Defencelessness, which was referred to during the Sundsvall Strike in 1879 and which was abolished in 1885, and the Master and Servants Act, which continued to be applied within the agricultural sector.
- 5 The Law Against Socialists was directed against associations, union funds and printed items which were considered to support socialist aims. The law entitled the police to declare trade unions illegal, which also happened to an extraordinarily high degree. Thus, within a few weeks, seventeen national trade union branches had been banned (Mehring 1976; Fricke 1976).
- 6 These figures are based on the percentage of union members among workers within industry, commerce and transport and communication. Figures for Germany are calculated from an estimation of the number of workers in 1905 rather than in 1895, which is the case in the source (*Tredje internationella berättelsen över fackföreningsrörelsen 1905*, 1907, p. 4, for Norway see *Fackföreningsrörelsen II*, 1912, pp. 65, 85).
- 7 Estimation based on economically active population in extractive industry, manufacturing industry, construction, and transport and communication (*European Historical Statistics*, 1975). In the USA, 9.9% of non-agricultural employees were organized in 1910 (Wolman 1936:116).
- 8 In our opinion, the very different data used by Lydall (1968) hardly constitute an adequate basis for comparison between countries. Lydall, however, is more cautious than most in the field, and he reports the differences in sources (pp. 145–147, and table notes in Appendix 7).
- 9 Sweden had a growth of industrial productivity in the 1920s and 1930s clearly outstripping the major industrial powers (Phelps Brown (1968), p. 313 and Appendix 3).

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