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Ordering the Social

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Ordering the Social: The History of Knowledge and the Usefulness of (Studying) Social Taxonomies

Abstract: During the twentieth century, a number of actors and institutions across the global north set out to develop hierarchical social taxonomies of their national populations. Mainly used for the making of statistics, these divisions soon came to be influential in policy and public debates. Using mainly Swedish examples, this article offers new ways of understanding social taxonomies, thereby adding insights into an understudied research object within the field of history of knowledge. Social taxonomies connect mundane and practical aspects of knowledge in the making – in terms of how actors order empirical material to through these create statistics – with larger public debates on society. They are, moreover, linked to different epistemic and political projects. I argue that social taxonomies should be understood as difference technologies; that is, ways of ordering and studying the social by producing differences between and sameness within its classifications.

Keywords: knowledge technology, social classifications, taxonomy, knowledge production, twentieth-century Sweden

When the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) launched the Great British Class Calculator in 2013, they explained that the traditional categories of working, middle, and upper class were outdated.[1] In collaboration with a team of sociologists led by Mike Savage, the BBC invited the British public to take a digital test to find out which class they belonged to within a newly constructed taxonomy made up of seven groups. Taking aspects of ordinary life, such as cultural consumption and media habits, as well as social and economic factors into account, this division was supposed to reflect the complexities of the twenty-first century. Within a few weeks, millions had responded to the call, indicating a more than keen interest in understanding oneself through a social division. It was "one of the most successful pieces of popular sociology ever conducted," Savage concluded, even though it led to a deluge of emails in his inbox from people complaining that the calculator

1 "The BBC's Class Calculator explained," *BBC News*, December 17, 2013, accessed January 3, 2023, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/business-25131283.

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had placed them in the wrong class.[2] The quiz became a media event, discussed in newspapers, cafes, and staff canteens throughout the UK.[3] Savage would later reflect that the project had resulted in the largest amount of political and academic criticism he had ever received throughout his entire career. The reason why, he thought, was because it had touched upon sensitive issues concerning inequality and societal progress.[4]

The Great British Class Calculator attempting to realign society by creating and promoting class knowledge can be placed in a lineage of other, similar ventures throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first century. More specifically, the above example alerts us to a distinct but understudied phenomenon, namely social taxonomies. Prevalent current divisions sort the population according to gender, ethnicity, occupational status, place and function within production, education level, or place of living (i. e., the urban-rural divide). In this article, I argue for the theoretical usefulness of studying these types of technologies of knowledge. Social taxonomies are in this article analysed as difference technologies for producing, studying, and managing the population. The point is not to say that taxonomies such as the Great British Class Calculator are inherently incorrect – for example, they are needed in social science and social policy to measure inequality – but that they create reality effects in terms of how we view society and ourselves, or, to use Ian Hacking's phrase, they make people up.[5] The article first discusses the theoretical underpinnings for how we may understand difference technologies and the research fields that this has bearings on, followed by discussing influential social taxonomies from the Swedish twentieth century up to the present time.

Social Taxonomies as Difference Technologies

The history of knowledge is a vibrant new research area concerning the transformation of knowledge.[6] A main theoretical concept in the field has been circulation,

2 Mike Savage, "Concerned about the BBC's Class Calculator? Let me explain," *The Guardian*, April 13, 2013, accessed January 3, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/apr/10/bbc-class-calculator.

3 Mike Savage, *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London: Pelican, 2015).

4 Mike Savage, *The Return of Inequality: Social Change and the Weight of the Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021).

5 Ian Hacking, "The Looping Effects of Human Kinds," in *Causal Cognition: A Multidisciplinary Debate*, ed. Dan Sperber, David Premack, and Ann James Premack (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

6 For a good historiographic overview, see Johan Östling, "Circulation, Arenas, and the Quest for Public Knowledge: Historiographical Currents and Analytical Frameworks," *History and Theory* 59,

meaning how knowledge circulates between actors and contexts.[7] An ambition has been to focus on wider societal circulation.[8] As a result, a history of knowledge approach analyses knowledge actors and arenas in order to show how actors circulate knowledge and how arenas serve as sites of interactions between actors and their audiences.[9] What I want to propose is the fruitfulness of studying technologies of knowledge in general and social taxonomies specifically. Technologies such as sampling, classifying, or surveying have enabled the production of knowledge and are part of knowledge infrastructures. In this way, they connect the micro processes of knowledge in the making with larger phenomena and processes. More interestingly, these technologies often become public knowledge in themselves.

Studying technologies of knowledge has been done in other fields. Lutz Raphael has urged historians to research what he refers to as the scientisation of the social; that is, the (un)intended effects of the human sciences on society in the last 150 years. According to Raphael, one way of studying this process is by focusing on technologies.[10] Moreover, historians of the social sciences have investigated the cost-benefit analysis as a technology for mechanical objectivity, the invention of statistical sampling as a way to create the idea of an averaged citizen, and how economists think through models.[11] Peter Becker and William Clark refer to tables, reports, questionnaires, dossiers, and index cards as "little tools of knowledge" used for establishing bureaucratic and academic authority.[12]

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no. 4 (2020); Joel Barnes and Tamson Pietsch, "The History of Knowledge and the History of Education," *History of Education Review* 51, no. 2 (2022).

7 Johan Östling et al., ed., *Circulation of Knowledge: Explorations in the History of Knowledge* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2018).

8 Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad, "Fulfilling the Promise of the History of Knowledge: Key Approaches for the 2020s," *Journal for the History of Knowledge* 1, no. 1 (2020).

9 Östling, "Circulation, Arenas"; David Larsson Heidenblad, *The Environmental Turn in Postwar Sweden: A New History of Knowledge* (Lund: Lund University Press, 2021); Johan Östling, Anton Jansson, and Ragni Svensson Stringberg, *Humanister i offentligheten: Kunskapens aktörer och arenor under efterkrigstiden* (Gothenburg: Makadam, 2022).

10 Kerstin Brückweh et al., "Introduction: The Scientization of the Social in Comparative Perspective," in *Engineering Society: The Role of the Human and Social Sciences in Modern Societies, 1880–1980*, ed. Kerstin Brückweh et al. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

11 Theodore Porter, *Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); Sarah E. Igo, *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); Mary S. Morgan, *The World in the Model: How Economists Work and Think* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

12 Peter Becker and William Clark, ed., *Little Tools of Knowledge: Historical Essays on Academic and Bureaucratic Practices* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

Statistical tools for governance are well-explored in the science and technology studies (STS) literature regarding, for example, indicators for a worldwide human rights regime.[13]

Scholars have for a long time been interested in classifications and categorisations in the making of sameness in groups and differences between groups. The focus has often been on either informal folk classifications or state projects and practices of categorising the population, as if these are completely separate.[14] An important research tradition is centred on Michel Foucault's concept of governmentality. The rise of population statistics from the eighteenth century and onwards meant that new areas such as public health could be formed and become the subject of interventions. Statistics constitute an integral part of the practices and mentalities in how states govern.[15] In the words of James C. Scott, statistics make the population legible for those in power.[16] Moreover, numbers can then come to be part of how individuals come to understand and govern themselves.[17] This perspective especially informs the scholarship having developed with regard to racial classifications.[18] A similar research tradition on nationalism has understood statistics – following Benedict Anderson's term *imagined communities* – as a way of establishing notions of a common national community.[19]

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13 Richard Rottenburg et al., ed., *The World of Indicators: The Making of Governmental Knowledge Through Quantification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Rainer Diaz-Bone and Emmanuel Didier, "The Sociology of Quantification – Perspectives on an Emerging Field in the Social Sciences," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung* 41, no. 2 (2016). See also Eli Cook's *The Pricing of Progress: Economic Indicators and the Capitalization of American Life* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) on how economic indicators have led to the capitalisation of American life and how it thereby co-produced capitalism.

14 A great deal of this research is summarised in Rogers Brubaker, Mara Loveman, and Peter Stamatov, "Ethnicity as Cognition," *Theory and Society* 33, no. 1 (2004).

15 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at The College de France 1978–1979* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 1999).

16 James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

17 Nikolas Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 197–232.

18 For example, Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Thomas S. Mullaney, *Coming to Terms with the Nation: Ethnic Classification in Modern China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011); Mara Loveman, *National Colors: Racial Classification and the State in Latin America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Debra Thompson, *The Schematic State: Race, Transnationalism, and the Politics of the Census* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

19 For example, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991); Silvana Patriarca, *Numbers and Nationhood: Writing Statis-*

These research fields offer valuable insights while at the same time being quite focused on state actors. The study of classification systems, especially class taxonomies, as tied to knowledge production and as in movement between different actors is underdeveloped. A history of knowledge perspective offers a way of analysing these technologies in circulation between actors and contexts, as well as how actors come to use and attribute different meanings to them. The examples in this article mainly originate from twentieth-century Sweden, but they have a bearing on how to understand social taxonomies in other countries during the same period.[20]

Bruno Latour argues in his book *Reassembling the Social* that the way in which social scientists refer to the social reifies it as something external to us and urges us to look for the associations in how actors assemble the social.[21] Following Latour, STS scholars speak of the importance to study "the social life of methods"; that is, how methods from the social sciences create what they purport to map out by, for instance, establishing a language to imagine and delimit it.[22] This perspective is useful in understanding social taxonomies. They, I argue, all create and enact one vision of the social by tying together people and groups as belonging to a common but differentiated population. My term "difference technology" highlights what these social taxonomies do in terms of creating and establishing differences between their classifications and sameness within them. They standardise and quantify categories and bring them together in a taxonomic order, thereby turning them into statistical facts. The precise classifications allow for new ways of viewing and studying the population, which then creates knowledge that can be used as a basis for social interventions and debate.

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tics in Nineteenth-Century Italy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Henrik Höjer, *Svenska siffror: Nationell integration och identifikation genom statistik 1800–1870* (Hedemora: Gidlunds förlag, 2001); Bruce Curtis, *The Politics of Population: State Formation, Statistics, and the Census of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Tong Lam, *A Passion for Facts: Social Surveys and the Construction of the Chinese Nation State, 1900–1949* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

20 Scholars on social classification systems originating from national statistical bureaus have mostly studied the ideas behind their creation, not how they have been used. See Margo (Anderson) Conk, "Occupational Classification in the United States Census, 1870–1940," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 9, no. 1 (1978); Simon Szreter, "The Genesis of the Registrar-General's Social Classification of Occupations," *The British Journal of Sociology* 35, no. 4 (1984).

21 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: University Press, 2005).

22 Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, "Populating Sociology: Carr-Saunders and the Problem of Population," *The Sociological Review* 56, no. 4 (2008); John Law, "Seeing like a Survey," *Cultural Sociology* 3, no. 2 (2009); Mike Savage, "The 'Social Life of Methods': A Critical Introduction," *Theory, Culture & Society* 30, no. 4 (2013).

The Swedish Social Group Division

Most of twentieth-century Sweden was dominated by a specific social taxonomy, the so-called social group division (*socialgruppsindelningen*). This division served several functions and needs from its inception in the years around 1900 to its slow demise in the 1970s and 1980s. Here, I discuss some of the areas it came to influence the most: voter statistics and election campaigning, market research, opinion polling, and the post-war social sciences.

Historian and political scientist Pontus Fahlbeck (1850–1923), professor at Lund University between 1889 and 1915, was the one presenting taxonomy as an answer to "the social question" and the problems of his time. In his book *Estate and Class* (*Stånd och klass*) from 1892, he classified Swedes into three classes – manual labourers, middle class, and upper class – based on occupation. Fahlbeck wanted to attach ideological struggles to underlying social processes, and the goal of his taxonomy was to show why the present upper class should continue to exert power over society. It was a call against the labour movement. The starting point for the analysis was that Western culture needed to be sustained by a group that did not have to carry out manual labour, and his classification served as a tool used to verify that society was set up in this appropriate way.[23]

Timothy Mitchell and Mike Savage have argued that experts in modern times create categories to govern on a national scale, such as the economy, the political, and the social by a delocalising act.[24] Social taxonomies are based on distance; they take people from their locality and put them into collective categories on a national level, making them legible for different kinds of actors such as the state. Fahlbeck was quite explicit in the epistemic precondition for creating his vision of society. Societal phenomena such as class appear "only when you contemplate things at a distance and at large," he explained.[25]

The ironic dialectic is that this distance would transform itself into intimate self-knowledge during the span of the twentieth century, as Swedes started to make sense of themselves through these social group classifications. In 2008, sociologist Rosemary Crompton proposed three ways of understanding class: first, as structured inequalities – as in the ways in which statisticians and social scientists

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23 Pontus Fahlbeck, *Stånd och klasser: En socialpolitisk öfverblick* (Lund: Collin & Zickerman, 1892).

24 Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Mike Savage, *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

25 Fahlbeck, *Stånd*, 51.

create class knowledge – often found in classifications that the classified themselves would not recognise; second, class as lifestyle, status, and culture; third, class as social and political organisation.[26] Studying a difference technology such as the social group taxonomy shows how these ways often become enmeshed.

When the right to vote was to be extended to a larger portion of men in the 1911 national elections – the electorate more than doubled – Fahlbeck proposed that the Central Bureau of Statistics (SCB) should classify voters by class. In the span of a few weeks that summer, three officials at the SCB tried to manage the tricky boundary work arising when all occupations in the country were to be sorted into three distinct groups. Describing the principles they had worked on, the officials said that a "social" assessment had been the basis for the creation of social groups I, II, and III, which were from the outset described as synonymous with the "upper class," "middle class," and "working class". Senior civil servants and white-collar workers, professionals, major businessmen, and landlords were placed in group I. Minor businessmen, lower civil servants, craftsmen, and farmers were put in group II, while labourers, crofters, farmhands, and fishermen were classified as belonging to group III. A difference compared to Fahlbeck's classification was that the SCB moved the lower civil servants and white-collar workers from the upper class and placed them in group II.[27]

This type of social taxonomy was not unique to Sweden, and other countries soon followed. The state statistical bureau in the UK developed a social taxonomy in 1913 to map family sizes in different segments of the population, which became the standard in the twentieth century for how British statisticians and social scientists analysed the population structure.[28] It specified five "social classes" and this division migrated to the U.S. in the 1930s, where it was extended to six categories.[29] Both the British and U.S. taxonomies divided the people in social group III into several separate categories. One effect was that no single class could be said to constitute a majority of the population. However, the divisions were similar in their focus on occupation as the basis for a person's social position and in their arrangement of the population in a one-dimensional status hierarchy. These may be contrasted with the official French taxonomy of the population in the post-war period. There, six occupational groups were distinguished according to sector

26 Rosemary Crompton, *Class and Stratification* (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), Ch. 2.

27 SCB, *Riksdagsmannavalen åren 1908–1911* (Stockholm: SCB, 1912), 30–31.

28 Szreter, "Genesis."

29 Conk, "Occupational."

and occupational function, but without any clear and discernible hierarchy between them.[30]

In Sweden, those tasked with strategic voter questions, the so-called *ombudsmän* in the political parties, soon saw the usefulness of the social group statistics created by the SCB in terms of navigating representative democracy. This was at a time when nationwide political parties started to mobilise voters. Voter statistics gave the Liberal Party (Frisinnade landsföreningen), the Conservative Party (Allmänna valmansförbundet), and the Social Democrats (Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti) the tools to make representative claims on sections of the population as well as knowledge on how to design specific election campaigns (e. g., geared at particular voters). The Social Democrats, for example, laid claim to social group III as the basis of their party.[31]

During the post-war period, the social group division became influential in social scientific research, but also in Social Democratic policymaking as a tool for mapping out social differences. For instance, it was used to measure inequalities in higher education. The division was hereby translated and inserted into policymaking in the welfare state. Meanwhile, the SCB had discarded the taxonomy for being unscientific. By the end of the 1940s, they argued that it no longer reflected the social structure and stopped classifying voter statistics in accordance with it without offering something new to replace it.[32] However, many social scientists at the universities saw the usefulness of a well-tested taxonomy that also enabled comparing survey results with other studies, which is why they continued using it.[33] The taxonomy remained a difference technology for imagining and interven-

30 Simon Szreter, “The Official Representation of Social Classes in Britain, the United States, and France: The Professional Model and ‘Les Cadres’,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35, no. 2 (1993). For an example of a Norwegian taxonomy, see Einar Lie, “Socio-Economic Categories in Norwegian Censuses up to about 1960,” in *Nordic Demography: Trends and Differentials*, ed. Jørgen Carling (Oslo: Unipub Forlag, Nordic Demographic Society, 2002). On statistical bureaus, see Margo Anderson, *The American Census: A Social History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988); Gunnar Thorvaldsen, *Censuses and Census Takers: A Global History* (London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2018).

31 This is explored in my article “Klassriket: Klasskunskaper i den svenska partipolitiska sfären, 1911–1940,” *Historisk tidskrift* 142, no. 2 (2022).

32 Statistiska Centralbyrån, *Riksdagsmannavalen åren 1949–1952* (Stockholm: SCB, 1953), 61.

33 For example Georg Karlsson, *Adaptability and Communication in Marriage: A Swedish Predictive Study of Marital Satisfaction* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1951); *Sociologi* (Stockholm: Forum, 1951); Edmund Dahlström, ed., *Svensk samhällsstruktur i sociologisk belysning* (Stockholm: Svenska bokförlaget, 1959); Gunnar Boalt, *Socialt beteende: Handbok i sociologi* (Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 1961); Gunnar Boalt and Torsten Husén, *Skolans psykologi* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1964).

ing in higher education up until the 1980s. For the Social Democrats – who remained in government between 1932 and 1976 and who influenced much of Swedish society – this kind of classification was relevant and practical due to the fact that social group III could easily be translated into their main constituency and political subject: the working class. The statistics thus provided a basis for social reforms and were used extensively in political debates, such as in Social Democratic policies aimed at getting more people from social group III to apply for higher education. The Social Democrats could, moreover, evaluate the effects of their reforms by continuing to measure the social background of the students.[34]

Already from an early stage, not everyone was happy about how the taxonomy ordered the social. For example, Georg Andrén (1890–1969), a conservative politician and professor of political science, in 1937 presented his interpretation of what characterised modern Swedish politics: the balance of power between the "social classes," which, in turn, divided the political in a way that was desirable for the country's prosperity. Andrén used the division introduced by SCB for the 1930 census, mapping Swedes according to their function in the workforce: as business owners (a large group since farmers were also included here), as service personnel (basically white-collar workers), or as workers. In this vision of the social, no class was in a majority position.[35] However, the liberal newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* countered Andrén's conclusion. "The statistics Professor Andrén uses are hardly fit for purpose," their editorial pointed out, instead extolling the social group division as more accurate. "Nowadays, the working class in the broad sense, or social group III of the electoral statistics, constitutes a qualified majority of those entitled to vote." In fact, the class structure was constantly shifted in favour of the labour movement, meaning that there was no balance of power at all. The newspaper argued that conservatives and liberals needed to face this pressing reality.[36]

Others imagined new rational categories beyond class, thereby showing the importance of studying competing ways of ordering the social. For example, statistician Thor Andersson – publisher of *Nordisk statistisk tidskrift* in the 1920s – dreamed of a "higher order for society." The statistics of the future would no longer divide the population into "higher" or "lower" classes, but according to a "rational" point of view. Andersson envisioned population statistics divided into categories of "workers and parasites" – those who contributed to the welfare of

34 See my article "Klass i begåvningsreservens tidevarv: Taxonomiska konflikter inom och genom svensk utbildningsforskning, c. 1945–1960," *Nordic Journal of Educational History* 8, no. 1 (2021).
35 Georg Andren, *Tvåkammarsystemets tillkomst och utveckling*, vol. 9 of *Sveriges riksdag: Historisk och statsvetenskaplig framställning*, ed. Nils Edén (Stockholm: Victor Petterson, 1937), 608–612.
36 "Balans: En klasspolitisk studie," *Dagens Nyheter*, March 14, 1937.

the nation and those who did not – social types who were represented in all occupational groups.[37]

The social group taxonomy always overlapped with other social orders, both in the way that the statistics were constructed and how the statistics were subsequently interpreted. In voter statistics, for instance, women were placed in their husband or father's social group when lacking employment but were classified according to their own occupation in case of wage labour. However, in social scientific surveys, the social position of the household was often determined by the husband's occupation, as this was taken for granted to be decisive, even when the woman worked as well. During the late 1950s, this led to criticism in the Swedish press for making women invisible in social scientific and bureaucratic knowledge production.[38] Moreover, even though social group statistics could be presented in a gender-neutral way – as both men and women are included under a designation such as social group III – the figures were often used in gendered discourses. Various types of social group statistics were often seen as primarily concerned with the male part of the population, such as figures on which groups attended higher education.[39] Men were thus constructed as the norm for society. In other cases, social group statistics on women were highlighted. After women's suffrage was granted by the Swedish parliament in 1919, for example, the Social Democratic Party started to address women from social group III as a specific voter group, who were considered important to canvass in order not to let the upper or middle classes win the elections.[40]

The social group division also influenced commercial actors in their statistical knowledge production concerning the consumer. The taxonomy came to structure knowledge regarding and enable interventions in advertising and consumption among Swedes from the 1930s and onwards. Ways in which to empirically survey the consumer and newspaper readers, with the promise of increased sales and more effective advertising, had been discussed before, but these notions were institutionalised and executed in the 1930s with the rise of market research compa-

37 Thor Andersson, "Folkregister och folkräkning i Sverge," *Nordisk statistisk tidskrift* 7, no. 1 (1928): 64.

38 Greta Liljefors, "Dagens frågor: Värre än sambeskattad," *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 25, 1958; Greta Liljefors, "Moder okänd," *Dagens Nyheter*, October 14, 1965; Kall, "Mamma har ingen betydelse när barnets socialgrupp avgörs", *Dagens Nyheter*, September 21, 1966.

39 See Lina Carls, *Våp eller nucka? Kvinnors högre studier och genusdiskursen 1930–1970* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2004).

40 Olivia Nordgren, *Arbetarkvinnorna och höstens val* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1928). This emphasis on the equal value of all votes was not reflected in the party's organisation and political priorities. See Kjell Östberg, *Efter rösträtten: Kvinnors utrymme efter det demokratiska genombrottet* (Eslöv: Brutus Östlings bokförlag, Symposion, 1997).

nies. Depending on who signalled an interest in a product in a market survey, or which customer groups read a particular newspaper, it was possible to choose sales tactics and advertising locations. Here, the social group taxonomy became important as a proven technology for classifying and studying the consumption habits of Swedes, knowledge that was then used to market goods and services.[41]

Marketers embracing social grouping had a lasting effect on Swedish public life. In the early 1940s, an advertiser decided to import Gallup's opinion polling business from the U.S. The rhetoric surrounding the project presented the opinion polls as a democratic tool through which Swedes could understand themselves. Swedish Gallup sold the surveys to newspapers, which, in turn, could use them to attract readers. In her book *The Averaged American: Surveys, Citizens, and the Making of a Mass Public* (2007), Sarah Igo has shown how Gallup, together with the media, was part of creating a discourse concerning the average citizen.[42] In Sweden, however, opinion polls were just as much about locating differences within the population, in which case the social group taxonomy saw new uses. Swedish Gallup used it as a difference technology to discern and compare opinions. We cannot overemphasise the importance of this adoption for the public visibility and impact of the social group classification. Year after year until the 1970s, sometimes as often as weekly, Swedes were confronted with the opinions of the different social groups on issues ranging from foreign policy to film preferences.[43]

The circulation and translation of the social group division into all these spheres of society made it a common point of reference in public debate. Sociological interview surveys from the 1970s show that many Swedes used social group terms when asked to describe the structure of society.[44] "This division has become so firmly established in our country that many seem inclined to consider it more or less self-evident that it makes sense to divide [...] the contemporary Swedish population into social groups," the SCB noted in a report.[45] At the same time, how-

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41 See my article "En marknad för klass: Marknads- och opinionsundersökningar som skillnadsmaskiner 1930–1960," *Lychnos* (2021). On market research and the rise of similar consumer engineering in other countries, see Jan Logemann, Gary Cross, and Ingo Köhler, "Beyond the Mad Men: Consumer Engineering and the Rise of Marketing Management, 1920s–1970s," in *Consumer Engineering, 1920s–1970s: Marketing Between Expert Planning and Consumer Responsiveness*, ed. Jan Logemann, Gary Cross, and Ingo Köhler (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).

42 Igo, *Averaged.*

43 Smedberg, "Marknad."

44 Richard Scase, "Hur industriarbetare i Sverige och England ser på makten i samhället," *Sociologisk forskning* 13, no. 1 (1976).

45 SCB, *Sociala grupper i svensk statistik: Ett förslag framlagt av en av Statistiska centralbyrån tillsatt arbetsgrupp* (Stockholm: SCB, 1967), 3.

ever, it was challenged and replaced by new ways of ordering the social, signalling a move away from class.

After Class: New Ways of Ordering the Social

In this section, I want to outline the establishment of new social taxonomies from the 1960s and onwards, all of which were based on statistical knowledge production and influenced political policy and public debates. These came from actors to the left of the Social Democrats, from within the SCB, and from the conservative and liberal opposition. These difference technologies were both part of producing social knowledge and enacting different social and political visions of Swedish society.

During the 1960s, the problem with poverty remaining in the Swedish welfare state was gaining a foothold in political discussions, egged on by a new generation of radical social scientists starting to research income inequalities and deep-seated social ills. This discovery of poverty was not unique to Sweden; a similar process can be seen in the United Kingdom and the United States.[46] As a result, the Social Democratic government appointed a commission to investigate the problems of low incomes, the so-called Low Income Inquiry (1965–1971). Its mission was to explore the remaining problems of low incomes in the Swedish welfare state – a kind of total survey of the Swedish population, which resulted in a dozen studies on everything from the health of Swedes, their political behaviour and cultural habits to working conditions.

The low-income earner was a new socio-political type created by the Low Income Inquiry – a classification uniting the unemployed, the long-term sick, pensioners, part-time workers, and low-wage earners into one group, previously scattered across different unions and social groups. The social group taxonomy often portrayed a social structure that was unequal in terms of people's resource distributions and life opportunities but with limited emphasis on antagonism between social groups. The radical Low Income Inquiry instead sought to revive a conflictual understanding of society, in which high-income earners grew at the expense of middle- and low-income earners, and where women, making up a majority of low-income earners, were described as oppressed by patriarchal structures. The media-active secretary of the inquiry, Per Holmberg, wanted the low-income earn-

46 Felix Römer, "Evolving Knowledge Regimes: Economic Inequality and the Politics of Statistics in the United Kingdom since the Postwar Era," *KNOW* 4, no. 2 (2020); Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-century U.S. History* (Princeton; Princeton University Press, cop. 2001).

ers to join forces and fight the high-income earners across the work sectors. This difference technology highlighted new cleavages based on income instead of the social status of one's occupation. An effect of this knowledge production was that the Social Democratic government and the Swedish Trade Union Confederation tried to boost the economic situation of the low-income earners. Moreover, income inequalities became a key topic in Swedish politics throughout the 1970s. The figures of the low- and high-income earner have been part of the Swedish political debate ever since, although rarely involving as radical politics as when the Low Income Inquiry was operating.[47]

In official statistics, the SCB had since the 1950s sought to find a replacement to the social group taxonomy. They were looking for a new division with clear, theoretically grounded, and objective criteria that could be accepted by many stakeholders.[48] Throughout the 1970s, new taxonomies were evaluated internally without settling on a replacement – they had by now become so politically charged that they were difficult to tackle. They could always be accused of hierarchising the population while also suffering from boundary issues in the way they were constructed. "A polemical pincer operation can thus be deployed against socio-economic groups; they are morally-politically offensive, and they have serious technical shortcomings," a working group opined in 1974.[49]

The SCB finally launched – more than three decades after they phased out the social groups – a new taxonomy in 1982: *Socioekonomisk indelning* (SEI), which structured the population according to occupational skills. Workers were divided into skilled and unskilled; white-collar workers into three classifications – low, medium, and high positions – and, lastly, business owners as their own classification.[50] This reconceptualisation of social differences based on skills and education can be seen in other countries as well. In the United Kingdom, for example, the taxonomy of social classes dominating throughout the twentieth century suddenly changed the rationale behind these classifications for the 1980 census – from explicitly focusing on the perceived social standing of your occupation to the amount of skills and education needed for said occupation.[51]

We currently see how the tendency to categorise according to skills and education has been pushed even further. The "uneducated" and the "educated" are

47 Carl-Filip Smedberg, "Låginkomsttagarna. Expertis, politik och mediering i formandet av en ny kategori omkring 1968," *Scandia* 84, no. 1 (2018).

48 SCB, *Sociala grupper.*

49 Gösta Carlsson et al., "Socio-ekonomiska grupperingar," *Statistisk tidskrift* 12, no. 5 (1974): 382.

50 SCB, "Socioekonomisk indelning (SEI)," *Meddelanden i samordningsfrågor* 4 (1982).

51 Richard I. Brewer, "A Note on the Changing Status of the Registrar General's Classification of Occupations," *The British Journal of Sociology* 37, no. 1 (1986).

now recurring figures in Swedish (and global) public debates and in knowledge production regarding phenomena such as school success, career choice, and cultural consumption.[52] This becomes a way of talking about social differences by locating and explaining these by the amount of education an individual has accrued: what one may refer to as an ongoing educationalisation of the social.[53] One effect of this is that elite positions seem more "deserved" based on the knowledge, or in other words the "human capital," they possess. Those with low status, income, and power, on the other end, face this situation due to educational failures. This thus seems to sit quite well with neoliberal and conservative ways of looking upon society.

Liberals and conservatives also launched their own ordering of the social. Hans L. Zetterberg, a right-wing ideologue and leader of SIFO (Svenska institutet för opinionsundersökningar) – the largest opinion poll company in Sweden at the time – in the late 1970s introduced lifestyles as the best way to understand Swedish social life.[54] Closely related, a series of articles in the conservative daily *Svenska Dagbladet* in the 1980s discussed the new fluid lifestyles in contemporary Sweden, which had replaced the old social groups as the most important aspect of social identities. Psychologists and market researchers conceptualised Swedish society as made up of five lifestyle groups: *the traditionalist*, wanting to remain in the old society; *the conventional*, embracing the consumer society; *the moral* ones, living in a society of commitments; *the climbers*, people heading toward the society of the future; and, lastly, there were *the extremists*, who dreamed of a fairer system. This difference technology mapped out a new society of consumerism and careerism, and those stuck in the old ways opposing this society.[55]

52 Skolverket, *Analyser av familjebakgrundens betydelse för skolresultaten och skillnader mellan skolor: En kvantitativ studie av utvecklingen över tid i slutet av grundskolan* (Stockholm: Skolverket, 2018); Myndigheten för kulturanalys, *Kulturvanor. Socioekonomiska analyser och tidstrender* (Myndigheten för kulturanalys, 2017).

53 New perspectives in the history of education speak of an "educationalization of social problems" in the West since the 18th century (i. e., how social problems and how to solve them are increasingly described in terms of a lack of or need for education. See Paul Smeyers and Marc Depaepe, ed., *Educational Research: The Educationalization of Social Problems* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2008). In the last 60 years, I argue, we instead see an educationalisation of the social: the acceleration over the last 60 years of describing the very structure of society in educational terms.

54 Hans L. Zetterberg: *Arbete, livsstil och motivation* (Stockholm: SAF, 1977). On Zetterberg's collaboration since the mid-1970s with Moderata samlingspartiet, the largest conservative party, see Lars Tobisson, *Främling i folkhemmet: Ett högerspöke ser tillbaka* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2009), 200.

55 Caroline Haux and Hedvig Hedqvist, "Grupper i dagens samhälle," *Svenska Dagbladet*, October 15, 1988.

In the mid-1980s, Zetterberg would warn against – but in doing so also create and diffuse – a divide in society between those in the private sector and those he called "the publicly supported" (*offentlighetsförsörjda*). By the latter category, he referred to people employed by the public sector as well as those depending on the state, such as retirees, long-term unemployed, and those on sick leave. The publicly supported had for the first time become a majority of the population (53.9 per cent according to Zetterberg and SIFO). This would, if not combated, lead to the inevitable rule of the Social Democrats since most of the publicly supported voted for them (as well as for the Left Party (Vänsterpartiet Kommunisterna) and the Liberal Party (Folkpartiet)). These parties would then continue to increase the public sector, leading to "spiralling taxes, spiralling inflation, spiralling interest rates, spiralling debt."[56] This theme came up in the Conservative Party's (Moderaterna) election campaigns, especially in party leader Carl Bildt's (1986–1999) rhetoric. His government between 1991 and 1994 introduced welfare cutbacks and neoliberal reforms such as school vouchers in a move to make the "backward" and state-dependent Swedish society more efficient and business-friendly.[57]

Later on, in 2004, an alliance of liberal and conservative parties launched the idea of a Sweden divided between the insiders of society and the outsiders (*innanförskap-utanförskap*). Those "outside," the 10–20 per cent of the population who were unemployed and on long-term sick leave, were "dependent" on and "passive" due to social benefits and should for their own good be forced to apply for jobs. This reconceptualisation remained important for these parties when in power between 2006 and 2014. Here, a large thriving society stood against those who had been placed on the outside. Lowering salaries and thresholds was key to letting them into society. This division is still very much present in contemporary political debates.[58]

At the same time, there are ongoing attempts to revive class-based language in the public debate, notably by the leftist think tank Katalys. They have published surveys of the Swedish class society in order to criticise inequalities and show the possibilities of a leftist revival if the working class were organised.[59]

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56 Hans L. Zetterberg, "Försörjning och röstning," *SIFO indikator* 3 (1985).

57 Anders Ivarsson Westerberg, Ylva Waldemarson, and Kjell Östberg, ed., *Det långa 1990-talet: När Sverige förändrades* (Umeå: Boréa, 2014).

58 Tobias Davidsson, "Utanförskapelsen: En diskursanalys av hur begreppet utanförskap artikulerades i den svenska riksdagsdebatten 2003–2006," *Socialvetenskaplig tidskrift* 17, no. 2 (2010). See, for example, "Utanförskapet är Sveriges största utmaning," Svenskt näringliv, accessed March 13, 2023, https://www.svensktnaringsliv.se/utanforskap/.

59 Daniel Suhonen, Göran Therborn, and Jesper Weithz, ed., *Klass i Sverige: Ojämlikheten, makten och politiken i det 21:a århundradet* (Lund: Arkiv förlag, 2021).

Conclusion

The (albeit selective) discussion on influential Swedish social taxonomies in the twentieth century up to the present time shows that difference technologies represent ways of ordering and studying the population by producing differences between and sameness within its classifications. Social taxonomies have been ubiquitous during the twentieth century, fulfilling an important role in the production of statistics and knowledge. Different actors and institutions needed social taxonomies to sort and structure data, and thereby create new knowledge, for their specific ends. In doing so, however, they also contributed to larger societal discourses, such as what the social structure looked like and, in some cases, what caused this stratification. These types of processes were not unique to Sweden. However, more thorough comparisons regarding the uses of social taxonomies in knowledge production and their presence in policy and public debates in different countries remain to be done.

The social group division, beginning with a conservative political scientist and the Central Bureau of Statistics in 1911, was soon used by the political parties, market researchers, opinion polls, the post-war social sciences, and welfare policymakers. It was thus part of fairly different projects, but they all enacted society as divided into three classes according to occupational status. As a result, the social groups became a common point of reference for how Swedes understood and debated society. The example shows the versatility and mobile character of these difference technologies, but also how actors, using them for their own political and epistemic ends, could unintentionally together create quite stable social worlds – in this case the Swedish class society. However, how this class society – co-constructed with the social group taxonomy – was understood and debated by different actors is the topic for another article.

From the 1960s and onwards, the social group division was challenged by actors from the left, the SCB, liberals, and conservatives. One dominant social taxonomy gave way to a plurality of technologies ordering the social in new ways. A tendency in these more contemporary social taxonomies is that those placed at the lower ends of society are passive and negative categories. The outsider and the uneducated, for example, are positions of deficiency. What is implicit here is a model saying that if only they can be brought into "normal" society, the inequalities and social problems facing them will dissolve. A hypothesis is that it is much harder to identify with and mobilise around a label of being uneducated or an outsider. These make it difficult to organise politically.

History of knowledge – which up to now has mostly focused on circulation, actors, and areas – has much to gain by studying difference technologies. Building

on research from governmentality studies, the history of the social sciences, and the history of statistics, I show how social taxonomies connect mundane and practical aspects of knowledge in the making – in how actors order empirical material to through these create statistics – with political policy, public debates, and discourses regarding society. Difference technologies all order and produce different social worlds, highlighting some things while hiding other aspects of society. Through these, categories become statistical facts and thus more trusted, although at the same time possible to criticise on scientific, political, and moral grounds. Furthermore, social taxonomies are charged in the sense that people want to discuss and make sense of them – as seen in the example of the Great British Class Calculator – illuminating the struggles and complexities of ordering the social and the importance for historians of knowledge to study them.

About the contributor

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