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Taxonomical lives: The making of social divisions in the Swedish press during the golden age of social democracy, 1945–76

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Abstract

This article investigates the media lives of a particular class taxonomy in the Swedish press from 1945 to 1976. Invented by the Central Bureau of Statistics in 1911, the 'social group division' system was abandoned in the early post-war period. Around the same time, however, it gained popularity in Swedish culture and political debate. While earlier research has noted that such bureaucratic class taxonomies – as in several other Western countries – conditioned how actors understood and created new knowledge about the population, this process of wider circulation remains understudied. Using insights from literature on 'the social life of methods' and the history of knowledge, which underline that knowledge is transformed by and transforms the contexts it circulates in, I show that print media was an arena for circulating and producing new meaning around class taxonomies. Although editorials shunned the social group division for incorrectly representing Swedish society and creating artificial class boundaries, journalists used the taxonomy to explain social structures. Furthermore, by interviewing 'typical' members of the different social groups, journalists made the system relatable and personal for their readers. In this context, the social groups were imagined as cultural communities, sharing cultural behaviours and preferences. Lastly, I analyse usages of the social group division in letters to the editor, which reveal that people felt they were being classified and wanted to offer their views of society, using the taxonomy in ways the experts had not intended. This study thereby contributes to the history of social taxonomies and class languages in the post-war period.

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media, history of class divisions, history of the social sciences, post-war Sweden, social life of methods

Introduction

In a 1989 newspaper story about Swedish society as reflected through three generations of women, the grandmother in the Warholm family stated that she belonged to group 3. Her granddaughter Lotta, on the other hand, positioned herself in group 2, while Lotta's mother, Evy, answered that she had her 'identity' in group 3 but counted herself, and was treated, as group 1: 'I have always sought the beautiful and spiritual that the first [group] stands for' ('3 kvinnor', 1989).[1] What do these numbers signify? They belong to a system whereby the Swedish people were divided into three social groups (*socialgrupper*), which was devised at the beginning of the 20th century in order to categorise voters and gradually became the default – in state commissions, the social sciences, market research, and opinion surveys – for classifying the population. Sociological surveys from the 1970s show that many Swedes made reference to social group 1, 2, and 3 when asked to describe the structure of society (Scase, 1976). This system of class divisions had 'broken through so completely that many seem to be inclined to take it more or less for granted that it makes sense to divide … the contemporary Swedish population into the social groups 1, 2, and 3', the Central Bureau of Statistics (SCB) had concluded in a report a few years earlier (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1967: 3). The social group taxonomy was able to reach these larger audiences and become a part of people's lives through the press, which is the focus of this article.

The aim of the article is to investigate the media life of a class taxonomy – specifically, the Swedish 'social group division' system – something that has not previously been done. The article thereby adds to the research literature on the history of social taxonomies and class concepts, as well as that on the Swedish post-war welfare society and its classification practices. Social taxonomies are interesting, I contend, because they connect people in new constellations and bring about novel ways of seeing society. They are knowledge technologies for quantifying collective concepts into precise classifications, and they enable overviews of as well as comparisons within populations (on social taxonomies within knowledge production, see Smedberg, 2023). Historians have previously examined the genealogies of American, British, and Norwegian administrative class divisions, remarking that during the 20th century these became 'second nature' for social scientists, yet not showing how this wider circulation happened or to what effect (Anderson, 1987; Lie, 2002; Szreter, 1984). Far more attention has been devoted to the ways in which bureaucratic statistical projects contributed to both national boundaries and racial concepts during the 19th and 20th centuries (e.g. Curtis, 2001; Dirks, 2001; Loveman, 2014; Patriarca, 1996).

Importantly, the study of social taxonomies also has bearing on the history of class concepts. In this historiography, they have been seen as constructed through political rhetoric, identity work by social movements, or workplace struggles (Cannadine, 2000; Thompson, 1996; Wahrman, 1995). Certainly, studies on representations of class in different media are plentiful (e.g. Kendall, 2011; Polson, Schofield Clark, and Gajjala, 2020). However, the purpose of this article is more specific: to analyse the circulation of a class taxonomy in the press. The article joins other attempts to take into account interactions between different kinds of expertise when studying the formation of class concepts (Boltanski, 1987; Renwick, 2016; Savage, 2010). Class languages, in my view, can be understood as closely connected to methods of knowledge production and circulation, such as statistics, scientific discourses and practices, market research, and opinion polling.

A small number of researchers have analysed how the social sciences influenced he construction of class concepts and identities in the post-war era. Mike Savage, for instance, has shown how British sociologists influenced common understandings of class (Savage, 2010). Jon Lawrence focuses on the complexity of the interview situation in the making of sociological knowledge, where the expectations of both sociologists and interviewees play a role, but also finds what he calls 'vernacular languages of class' in notes kept by sociologists (Lawrence, 2014). Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, making similar use of sociological surveys, charts vernaculars of class from the 1960s onwards, and discerns a decline of deference in Britain during this period. Among other manifestations, this took the form of a rejection of class understood as a system of status hierarchy (Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, 2018). There is a tendency in the literature above to look at non-expert uses of class concepts as signs of vernacular understanding. By interrogating press material, I argue, it is instead possible to view non-expert uses of class concepts as productive for the creation of new meanings and as interventions in public debates.

The ways in which class languages become gendered – how images of the working class have become more masculine, for instance – have been examined by various scholars (Hirdman, 1998; Scott, 1988). Social taxonomies also intersect with gender and other types of divisions, as Margo Anderson has shown in the context of the creation of the US census (Anderson, 1987). Although almost all of the experts who compiled social group statistics were men – and the social group designation of a given household was therefore often based on the man's occupation – women responded to, discussed, and criticised the taxonomy within the press, as we will see. Gender was also important with regard to an actor's critique of the social group taxonomy.

The analytic framework used in this article takes its cue from STS studies on the social life of methods – how social scientific research tools circulate and become productive in different contexts (Hacking, 1999; Law, 2009; Osborne and Rose, 2008) – and the field of the history of knowledge, which understands knowledge as something that is transformed by movements between actors, arenas, and contexts (Raj, 2013). The knowledge produced as part of the project of mapping and studying the Swedish social structure, which involved numerous experts, was interpreted and mediated in different ways, changing in the process.

The emphasis in this article is on press genres in which political and personal views were encouraged – editorials, reportage, commentary, and letters to the editor – which provide the focus for the article's subsequent sections. The choice to examine different genres also makes it possible to compare how actors within the press employed the system of social group divisions. However, in order to understand the use of the system in the Swedish press, I have also looked at how social scientists and politicians engaged with the taxonomy during this period. The article begins by investigating the origins and usages of the taxonomy within knowledge-producing institutions, while also focusing on how the governing Social Democrats perceived it. I then analyse the taxonomy's presence within editorials, columns, reportage, and commentary within the press, before turning lastly to its circulation in letters to the editor.

The social group division in theory and practice

The post-war era was a golden age for Swedish social democracy, which in turn affected the popularisation of the social group division. After ruling jointly with other parties during the war, the Social Democrats now formed their own government. Oscillating between 40% and 50% of the electoral vote, the Social Democrats acquired passive support from the Communist Party, later invited the Farmers' Party to be part of the government (1951–7), and finally, in 1976, lost to a coalition of conservative and liberal parties. The Social Democrats massively expanded public education, housing, and health care, among other areas. They abandoned most ideas related to the nationalisation of production, having eliminated Marxist concepts such as the 'class struggle' and 'exploitation' from their party programme in 1944, focusing instead on creating high levels of economic growth, establishing a progressive and redistributive tax system, maintaining low unemployment figures through ambitious vocational training programmes, and offering social services (Andersson, 2006; Hort 2014; Lewin and Lindvall, 2015). They ran on a programme of 'welfare politics', building a 'welfare society' that encompassed everyone (Edling, 2013). This era was also marked by a cooperative relationship between employers and organised labour – and with it, a low level of labour market conflict – following an agreement in 1938 between the Swedish Trade Union Confederation and the Swedish Employers' Confederation (Svensson, 2015). Swedish society went from being one of the most socially unequal in Europe to becoming one of the most equal in the world (Bengtsson, 2019).

In this welfare society, however, people did not stop classifying each other. A drive to combat inequality led to a greater degree of knowledge production than ever before related to social differences. The most prevalent form of classification used for this was the 'social groups', developed for gathering voter statistics in 1911 by the SCB. Social group 1 were professionals, business owners, and public officials; social group 2 included small business owners, lower-ranking civil servants, office workers, artisans, and farmers; while workers were placed in social group 3 (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1912). Significantly, this system was influenced by the conservative politician and professor of political science and statistics Pontus Fahlbeck's 1892 book *Stånd och klasser* (Estates and Classes), which in turn took ideas from the German *Kathedersozialismus*. The social taxonomy Fahlbeck introduced in his book was intended to show that the present class order was required for maintaining Western civilisation. The upper class were no idlers, according to him; they had the important function of advancing culture. His system discursively constructed order in opposition to the workers' movement (Fahlbeck, 1892; see also Smedberg, 2023). The SCB used Fahlbeck's taxonomy as a blueprint to a large extent, but also stated that their social group division was based on the ‘social evaluation’ of an individual’s position in the occupational structure, factoring in general status, income, and education, albeit without providing much explanation of exactly how this was done (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1912: 28–31).

The uncertainty of exactly what the social group taxonomy measured made it a continuous target for criticism. Some Swedish social scientists called out the system for being arbitrarily constructed, based only on the subjective opinions of the civil servants working at the SCB (Westerståhl, 1952). This criticism in fact led the SCB to stop using the division after 1948. However, at the same time, many social scientists and state commissions started to apply the social group taxonomy to order their own material – in studies concerning education, city planning, public health, crime, and religious life, for example – because it was well tested and facilitated empirical comparisons with other studies. Even though social scientists expressed criticisms of the system for having faulty conceptual foundations – stressing that it was not grounded in any theories of stratification such as those found in Marx or Weber – they used it for lack of any alternative. In addition, from the 1930s and 1940s onwards, the division became the default way of categorising the Swedish population in market research and opinion polling (Smedberg, 2021). In these different ways, the social group taxonomy dominated post-war empirical endeavours to describe and analyse the structure of society. In Britain, in contrast, the occupational class taxonomy developed by the General Registrar Office in the 1910s remained the dominant statistical template up to the end of the 20th century (Szreter, 1984). The Swedish social group taxonomy did not enjoy such persistent backing from the state apparatus; instead, individual social scientists repeatedly resurrected it. This makes its history even more interesting, with the system circulating in the Swedish press decades after the SCB had abandoned it.

The Social Democrats had somewhat of an ambivalent stance towards the social group taxonomy. When it was first introduced, the party intellectual, and later prime minister, Rickard Sandler wrote a long assessment of the taxonomy, calling it a scientific breakthrough and a resource for party strategists wanting to understand the electorate. However, he also argued that it seemed as if the underlying rationale behind the system was grouping people based on their standard of living. According to Sandler, this gave a static view of society. To understand politics, he believed, one needed to see the historical direction and dynamics of the social classes. His Marxian understanding was that the main divide was between labour and capital – workers and capitalists – with a middle class in between these forces (Sandler, 1912).

In the post-war period, this line of critique mostly disappeared. Now Social Democrats argued that the social group taxonomy did not capture the complexity of the new welfare society. The party secretary, Sven Aspling, hoped that a new and more accurate system of divisions would be developed that captured the socio-economic standing and value systems of different occupational groups (Aspling, 1952). At this stage, therefore, the Social Democrats seem to have viewed the Swedish social structure as based on unevenly distributed standards of living, rather than a fundamental divide between labour and capital.

However, although they criticised the social group taxonomy in theory, Social Democrats often found knowledge produced through the system helpful, using it in debates, election campaigns, and policymaking. Statistics relating to inequality incentivised and legitimised reform. Importantly, it was easy for the Social Democrats to 'translate' the category of social group 3 into the working class, the group they claimed to represent and their main political subject. The social group taxonomy became especially influential in structuring knowledge about education. Recurrently from the late 1940s to the 1970s, state commissions and social scientists published reports mapping the social background of the student population, evaluating how different educational reforms played out, in order to increase the proportion of students from a working-class (social group 3) background (Smedberg, 2021). Gendered assumptions frequently intersected with the social group taxonomy. For instance, experts and politicians was mostly interested in unequal access to higher education among different classes of men (Carls, 2004). Overall, therefore, the Social Democratic Party popularised and made relevant the social group taxonomy by using it to measure and debate inequalities, although they acknowledged that it was not wholly accurate in its representation of the structure of society.

In addition, the Social Democrats applied the taxonomy to examine structural changes in the electorate. One fear during the 1950s, backed by statistics concerning the social group distribution of the population, was that the middle class was becoming larger while the working class was shrinking, which mirrored discussions in other parts of Europe at the time (Aspling, 1950; Butler, 2020: 160). The term *wage earners* (*löntagare*) became a way to speak to both blue- and white-collar workers at the same time in political rhetoric (Svensson, 1994). However, internally, social group 3 was still the focus. In the second half of the 1960s, for example, the party recruited Jan Lindhagen (1935–2010) – formerly based at the largest opinion polling company in Sweden – to analyse the electorate. Using the social group taxonomy, Lindhagen argued that the party would be able to attain a majority of the vote if it could only mobilise its 'own' class, since more than half of the population still belonged to social group 3 (Olander, 1970).

Societal boundaries visible: The social group taxonomy in columns and newspaper reportage

How, then, were new meanings created around the taxonomy within the Swedish press? The analysis here is based on the usages of the class taxonomy in the press between 1945 and 1976, located with the help of word searches for the term *socialgrupp** in the digitised newspaper archive at the National Library of Sweden. The archive can be found on the Svenska dagstidningar website (https://www.tidningar.kb.se), and it covers a wide range of the largest daily newspapers from across the entire political spectrum. During the period examined here, the search term was mentioned 10,469 times. The material located through this search was then analysed by a qualitative reading. As is the case for much digitised material, the database sometimes misreads closely typed letters; there is therefore a possibility that some instances of the word *socialgrupp** have been omitted. These errors should not affect the overall picture. Moreover, the archive does not include the whole media landscape. Publications such as trade union magazines are missing, limiting the scope of this article to the commercial public sphere. In addition, the material does not allow me to categorise the users of the taxonomy by social background, or regional or generational belonging. However, what is gained through the use of a digitised archive such as this is the possibility of following a topic across many genres, and seeing changes over time. The social group taxonomy went from being rarely mentioned in the early 1940s to becoming established and well known by the 1970s.

Liberal and conservative editorials in the late 1940s and through the 1950s explicitly rejected the social group taxonomy as a harmful system. The leading liberal tabloid *Expressen* argued that its only function was to convince Swedes that they still lived in a class society, a ploy meant to keep the Social Democrats in power, since it made workers feel they had to vote in solidarity with their class instead of according to their true individual political beliefs ('Förlegade klassbegrepp', 1947). According to the liberal-leaning newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, reality showed how differentiated resources such as income, wealth, and education were throughout the population, to the extent that no real classes could be claimed to exist: 'Every demarcation is impossible' ('Klassolikheter och klasskänsla', 1949). The largest conservative daily, *Svenska Dagbladet*, presented the social group taxonomy as outdated. It had long been clear to most, the newspaper maintained, 'that such a schematic division does not fit into our current, highly differentiated society' ('Medelklassens frammarsch', 1950). The taxonomy was ripe for revision, in their view.

That was also the conclusion drawn by the social democratic tabloid *Aftonbladet*, in line with what the Social Democratic Party secretary, Sven Aspling, had articulated earlier: the social group taxonomy was too rough to say much about social boundaries in Sweden. 'Our picture of reality depends on the templates the statisticians are forced to use', the newspaper contended. This awareness of the socially constructed nature of society did not lead them to reject attempts by 'the experts' to produce new knowledge. Instead, new classifications needed to be developed. *Aftonbladet* suggested that the parliament should grant Sweden's statisticians funds to construct better taxonomies ('Olika fållor', 1959).

However, a dependency on statistical templates was common to all these newspapers. The Swedish press was filled with mentions of the social group taxonomy. In an ironic twist, newspapers symbolically upheld the social boundaries that their editorials wanted erased. By the end of the 1940s, for instance, the social group taxonomy had become a popular joke among columnists. 'Today I am reached by a problem from social group I', began one text. The humorous effect comes from the mix between the informal and the bureaucratic tone (Kid, 1949; see also Eveo, 1951; Red Top, 1957). A common technique was to make playful changes to the taxonomy, such as placing someone in social group 2.5, 1.5, or 0.5, or describing a piece of literature as having the quality of social group 3, which in this case was used as a derogative term. Similarly, attributions to social group 1 could function as a form of praise (e.g. Hjort, 1957; Lång 1956; Parm, 1954).

At the same time, the arts and culture sections of newspapers described authors and literary themes in social group terms. The taxonomy provided a language through which the arts and culture pages could convey their societal relevance, and made it possible to discuss societal problems and changes (e.g. Harrie, 1960; Uddenberg, 1952; von

Platen, 1952; Wahlund, 1952). This way of reading culture was also taught to newspaper readers more directly. In a 1956 column, the philosopher and public intellectual Ingemar Hedenius shared his best reading strategies in a project designed to educate the newspaper audience. According to him, a good reader asked questions such as whether a book's plot was set in social group 1, 2, or 3 (Hedenius, 1956).

More thorough ways to present the social group taxonomy appeared in journalists' reportage. Swedish newspapers started producing their own class knowledge. Here, the social groups were imagined as cultural communities, sharing habits and patterns of taste. In one report, for instance, *Expressen* counted those who travelled on the Helsingborg ferry one spring day in 1953. The vehicles were indexed based on car brand, the owner's social group, and reason for travel; the results were turned into a chart, covering a whole page, that combined societal self-knowledge and entertainment for readers (Wadén and von Beökönyi, 1953). In the second half of the 1950s, *Aftonbladet* initiated a recurring interactive element called 'Little Stockholm', where readers could submit questions to a panel of Stockholm inhabitants, representative of the city in terms of gender, age, and social group, to learn how they felt about and viewed various matters. For example, published tables presented the Stockholmers' holiday habits divided according to gender and social group ('Lilla Stockholm', 1957). With these media forms, newspapers attempted to cultivate a certain way of understanding society through statistics and social groups.

One transformation of the social group taxonomy concerned how people started describing it as something different from class, whereas the two phenomena had previously been understood by the SCB as synonymous. One pundit in the press lamented that Sweden had become a 'classification society' that forced people to become aware of their social group, replacing an earlier society characterised by class struggle (W., 1951). Others saw the taxonomy as a mere change of words to cover up what in fact remained a class society. 'The classes have been abolished', one columnist mused, 'nowadays we have social groups: I, II, and III' (Eveo, 1951). Although social scientists never discussed the division as being anything other than class-based, it was portrayed in parts of the press as signifying something different.

A common media framing of the discussion in the 1960s was interviews with families belonging to different social groups along with summaries of surveys and research about lifestyle variations. *Aftonbladet* and *Expressen* published a series of articles in 1966 and 1967, respectively, on the theme of class boundaries in Sweden. Here, the social groups were presented as part of a 'strongly criticised' taxonomy, but also an accurate representation of social reality: 'The social groups still exist', *Aftonbladet* stated, in a move that both reified and criticised the taxonomy. Readers learnt which occupations belonged where, and how the social groups differed in areas such as housing, clothing, and eating and leisure habits. Through photographs, readers were aided in visualising representative figures from the three groups. The headline offered the statement that 'class boundaries are still not dissolved!' (Waldén, 1966). *Expressen* juxtaposed statistics and knowledge about the social groups with interviews with families acting as representatives of each group, providing insights into the lived experience of a typical social group member (Lindgren, 1967). These reports both objectified the taxonomy as a societal reality and made it personal for readers.

These reports could also give voice to dissenting ways of understanding the social structure. In 1969, *Aftonbladet* published the report ‘Today’s Student Is Upper-Class’, in which three students from different social group backgrounds were interviewed. ‘Mats belongs to social group 1 – like most students’, readers learnt about one of the interviewees, below a picture of him. ‘But I do not feel like an upper-class student’, Mats retorted, rejecting the classification. According to him, it had become ‘passé to talk about which social group you belong to’. Jenny, defined as ‘social group 3’ in the article, also rejected the concept of social groups, but for a different reason: they were not homogenous groups. She explained that she would rather divide people into ‘classes’, those who owned the means of production and the working class – a division corresponding to a Marxist taxonomic principle (Ekeflo, 1969). Marxist class sentiments could thus be found in Sweden, especially after the radicalisation of 1968. A few Social Democrats also argued for a return to a more Marxian understanding of class (e.g. Hofsten, 1972; Olhede, 1978). However, the social group taxonomy was the dominant tool for understanding the social structure among experts, as discussed above, and opinion surveys from the time suggest it was the more popular system of class division (Scase, 1976; Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1967). However, more thorough comparisons between methods of classification within the Swedish welfare society – including informal methods, such as the people versus elites, poor versus rich, or those based on union membership (workers, white-collar workers, and academics) – remain to be done.

The conclusion of a report from the 1960s was that the social group taxonomy had a life of its own, regardless of whether state administration or social scientists wished to abolish the concept (Larsson, 1967). The socialist newspaper *Arbetet*, for example, featured a telling headline to this effect: ‘The Social Groups Have Been Abolished. But Only Statistically’ (‘Socialgrupperna är avskaffade’, 1968).

Commentators both to the left and to the right of the Social Democrats continued to criticise the social group taxonomy for obscuring reality. In a 1968 opinion piece in *Aftonbladet*, the socialist poet Göran Palm wrote about social democratic rhetoric that hid societal and political conflicts. Its ‘main weapon’, according to Palm, was the social group taxonomy. Using terms such as *lower-class* and *upper-class* brought to mind injustice and struggle, he stated, but when social groups were pitted against each other, ‘most of the charge disappears’. The social group terms suggested harmony in society (Palm, 1968). For the right-wing politician Anders Arfwedsson, the social group taxonomy instead cemented ‘prejudiced political attitudes’, such as that the academic belonged to the upper class and that large affluent groups among employees belonged to the lowest class (Arfwedsson, 1974).

The SCB was by now trying to find a replacement for the taxonomy. They recognised that knowledge-producing institutions needed a uniform, objective, and commonly accepted template in the quest to measure inequality and evaluate social changes (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1967: 3). This, however, proved quite difficult. Classifying people was a sensitive matter. ‘A polemical pincer-movement’, a new working group in the 1970s argued, could always be ‘launched against socio-economic group-divisions; they are morally and politically offensive, and they have serious technical shortcomings’ (Carlsson *et al.*, 1974: 382). In an era marked by a shared democratic ethos, the SCB was vulnerable to criticism. It would take until 1982 before a new socio-economic division was in place (Statistiska Centralbyrån, 1982).

The examples above show another transformation of the social groups. Through the framing of journalists, they were presented as cultural communities. The taxonomy also became personified in interviews with members from each social group. In this way, the media constructed the rather abstract social group taxonomy as something relevant to newspaper readers. Readers were encouraged to see themselves as belonging to a social group, sharing experiences with others in the same group throughout the nation. Journalists and editorial staff, with the power to shape public opinion, encouraged conversations about the Swedish social structure to be expressed in social group terms. However, another process taking place in the Swedish press in this period is also discernible: practices of discussing and comparing the social group taxonomy to other methods of classification.

Practices of comparing classifications and the making of social reflexivity

A number of columnists and social scientists from across the political spectrum felt a need to bring to the public eye different ways of classifying the social. These actors can be seen as cultural 'translators' of class knowledge to a broader audience, explaining what the taxonomy meant and warning people not to rely on it as a representation of society. They tried to teach Swedes about the artificial nature of social taxonomies and inject a sense of social reflexivity when dealing with statistical concepts. These examples further show the importance of looking at the press to understand meaning-making around social taxonomies in the post-war era.

The social democratic writer James Rössel penned a long commentary on different class terminology and taxonomies for the mass-circulated women's journal *Idun*. Under the title 'Are We Estate Persons, Class Warriors, or Social Group Members?', Rössel brought to light the increasing amount of statistical information assigning Swedes to different classes. He explained how Swedes had earlier been categorised into estates, while Marxists understood the population as divided between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Both these divisions were equally irrelevant for modern society. The most important taxonomies today, Rössel argued, were those that used three groups, such as the social group taxonomy. Rössel suggested that the belief in a society of three classes was almost religious, and that those who envisioned society this way wanted to soothe themselves with the idea of a large middle class as a buffer against the coarse and unruly proletariat and the equally brutal capitalist class. Rössel dismissed this as a fantasy. For him, it was not so much that the social group taxonomy was wrong, but that it should be interpreted with care. He took the example of three fictitious people – a member of parliament, an academic, and a librarian – who on paper had around the same income but led very different lives, to show how misleading such class divisions could be. His article speaks to an awareness of the abundant statistical knowledge production through social groups that had taken place during the early post-war, into which Rössel tried to inject scepticism about the value of these kinds of schematic classifications of people. What Rössel underlined was that the social groups were labels imposed on people for the sake of statistical compilation. It took active effort to do so, and the SCB, Gallup, and social scientists did so with different goals in mind (Rössel, 1949).

A couple of years later, the former communist intellectual turned conservative Per Meurling wrote a long critique in the same journal of what he saw as a societal obsession with the social group taxonomy. He questioned why 'political commentators, public speakers … officials with folders, unknown conversationalists in train compartments, and wives with shopping bags should be so fascinated by this rather unrealistic division'. His long text was titled 'In the Social Group Cage', a reference to the fact that today's Swedes had been imprisoned in new identities. For him, Sweden was already democratised: a bricklayer could marry an aristocrat without anyone raising an eyebrow; a janitor could spend a nice evening conversing with an army captain in the sauna, never realising their different social standings until they were back in the changing room. Using these rather strange examples, Meurling attempted to prove that it was impossible to, in any meaningful sense, divide the population into social groups. It served only to maintain a sense of indignation towards those seen as privileged, and foster false humility in others, thus fortifying social barriers between people (Meurling, 1955).

In 1957, several interventions appeared, all trying in a pedagogical and humoristic way to explain the social group taxonomy to a broader audience, similar to Rössel and Meurling. One column in one of the largest tabloids took the reader 'behind the scenes' of the production of social group statistics. It followed the difficult process of classifying a Stockholm painter called Jansson. Although the SCB had abandoned the social group taxonomy, some cities, including Stockholm and Gothenburg, continued using it to produce their own electoral statistics. When the painter voted in September 1957, 'he gave social-Sweden [*social-Sverige*] a hard nut to crack', the columnist explained. If he was just a painter, he belonged in the lowest of the social groups; but if he could be called a master, in the old sense of being an artisan, he should be in social group 2; and as an artist, he should be placed in social group 1. To complicate the matter even more, many artists nowadays leaned left in their political beliefs and identified as proletarian; should he therefore be placed back in social group 3? The columnist pondered that the careful and time-consuming labour going into dividing people into social groups 'may only have the purpose of showing that equality cannot be pursued ad infinitum, even in a fully democratised society' (Gerdes, 1957; see also 'Adjunktens lektion', 1957). It is unclear whether this laconic statement was ironic or honest. Regardless, the reader was given insight into the artificial nature of social divisions.

Another example is an essay by Hans L. Zetterberg, at the time a lecturer in sociology at Columbia University, but later director of the largest polling company in Sweden, as well as a conservative ideologue. In one of the largest weeklies, *Vecko-journalen*, Zetterberg listed five different 'orders of precedence' (using the older word *rangrulla*) that Swedes lived by. The problem of social position was as difficult for the host of a dinner party as for a sociologist, according to him, because 'society moves not with *one* uniform order of precedence but with several different hierarchies at the same time'. These five coexisting orders were Birth (nobility, commons, but also the Romani); Holiness (bishop, priest, congregation, unbaptised); Competence (professor, higher education graduate); Power (politicians, civil servants, functionaries); and, lastly, the most obvious one that came to mind when Swedes thought about orders of precedence, Class (the three social groups). In reality, he argued, there was overlaps between several of these hierarchies, and people were always negotiating between them in everyday life. His intervention was intended to show the multiple orders existing within the welfare society (Zetterberg, 1957). One can see his arguments as an attempt to cultivate a social reflexivity in how Swedes managed the question of overlapping and intersecting status orders, a counterpoint to all those knowledge-producing institutions whose social group statistics were constantly being mediated in the press. The article will now turn to how people reacted to and used the social group taxonomy in letters to the editor.

Visions of the social in letters to the editor

From the late 1940s onwards, people used the social group taxonomy to categorise themselves or identify societal trends in letters to the editor. I have identified 66 such letters published between 1947 and 1976. An interesting dynamic stems from the fact that, as we will see, women wrote in to the newspapers to discuss the social group taxonomy, in contrast to the almost exclusively male experts who produced the different kinds of social group statistics.

One early reader-correspondent, a man who ran a haulage company, lamented that, by paying high taxes, he was contributing to overbalancing the budget, thus helping ‘social groups I and II’, although he himself belonged to ‘Group III’. We can interpret this as a way of giving himself and his social group societal visibility, demonstrating their value as a group in supporting the other classes (Åkare i Sjövinkel, 1950). Another letter writer complained that public service radio expressed clear differences in the way different people were valued by commemorating the deaths only of those in social group 1 (Vi är stoft och skugga, 1954). A man who was a self-categorised member of social group 1, on the other hand, protested the shifting norms in gender relations. ‘Is it really the intention that a man in my position should deal with things such as the dishes’, he asked, stating that his time was too valuable to be taken up with such ‘simple tasks’ (Ej toffelhjälte, 1954). This letter writer’s assertion of his social group 1 status was intended to argue for his greater value and separateness from the rest of the population. These examples show the very different ways the taxonomy could be used.

As we will see, correspondents attached different meanings to the taxonomy, some understanding it as interchangeable with class, and others seeing it as a new form of demarcation in society. The system became increasingly popular for several reasons. People wanted to make sense of their place in a changing society; others used it to discuss inequality or to highlight the act of categorisation as something inherently undemocratic. The taxonomy provoked strong reactions in an age of democratisation. Many felt that they were being looked down upon through the act of categorisation.

Another use of the taxonomy was to question other methods of classification. A proposal from the opposition to eliminate free school lunches, with the explanation that this would not affect ordinary people, prompted a reader of the communist newspaper *Norrskensflamman* to wonder who counted as ordinary people: ‘You can hardly mean us in social group 3’ (Arbetare, 1957). The social group taxonomy helped demonstrate how a term such as *ordinary people* did not encompass a majority of the population (see, similarly, Besviken mamma, 1957; Frågvis, 1959; Missbelåtna tittare, 1966).

A common type of letter posed questions about the social group taxonomy, with correspondents wanting to know what it was. This kind of uncertainty is something we also see permeating politics at the national level. In 1964, eight Liberal Party MPs motioned in the parliament for the removal of the social group taxonomy from all 'official' statistics. They deemed it an inaccurate reflection of society, but, more importantly, argued that it symbolically degraded certain jobs, threatening the balance of the labour market by discouraging people from choosing manual work (Broberg *et al.*, 1964). After deliberating with the SCB, which replied that the taxonomy had not been in use by the bureau since 1948, the Social Democrats were able to state that no such 'official' taxonomy existed. There was nothing to debate, they concluded. Here, we see how the question of whether anything that could be called an 'official' classification existed was brought to the political agenda (Allmänna beredningsutskottet, 1964).

Questions about who belonged in which social group, why the taxonomy existed, and whether it was still in use came up repeatedly in letters to the editor, reflecting this ambiguity. These letters also indicate that many people felt that the taxonomy was important, so much so that they wrote to newspaper editors for an explanation of the system (Greta, 1968; Gunnel, 1970; 'Helenas syn på saken', 1965; Intresserad, 1954; Kock, 1966; Mellgren, 1966; Rosengren, 1969). One letter writer stated that he had heard the term *social group* mentioned by a doctor, and wanted to know what it meant. This illustrates the interpretive role that newspaper editors took on in explaining the taxonomy to inquisitive readers. For example, the social democratic *Aftonbladet* responded to these letters in an egalitarian manner: after describing what the social groups were, they stressed that they were equally good and that no one group stood above any other. For them, the taxonomy did not hierarchise (Hopp om svar, 1961).

A common criticism in these letters was that use of the taxonomy led to society remaining unequal. People decried what might be called a classifying mentality. The correspondent 'Housewife With Children' summed up this attitude neatly: 'As long as the social group division is used by those in power and by the mass media, class society exists' (Hemmafru med barn, 1972). Another letter writer claimed that 'the entire Swedish people are placed in different social groups by the authorities … and are treated according to that'. The writer wondered rhetorically if this was what the Social Democrats called democracy (Folkhemsmedlem, 1965; see also Demokrat, 1967; Förargad arbetarhustru, 1967; Lilljeqvist, 1971; Mattson, 1958; R. B., 1959). A woman who had been asked at hospital about her husband's profession wrote that she wanted to be treated for her illness rather than based on her husband's social group, and demanded that public health institutions stop classifying people (Klassindelad läkarvård, 1968). These letters reveal that many Swedes objected to what was seen as the all-encompassing classification of citizens by those in power. Letter writers felt objectified and patronised by such practices and argued that they were undemocratic.

This view was not shared by everyone, however. Under the heading 'Keep the Class Boundaries!', a letter writer in the late 1950s pointed out that the social group taxonomy should be seen as an asset: it gave Swedes the ability to learn about how the different classes lived. 'Since, after all, class boundaries remain in reality, I do not understand why they need to be erased on paper and in statistics.' The taxonomy only reflected a stratified and unequal society, and that was where the real problems were located (Svångrem 3,75, 1959).

Others suggested better ways to categorise people, creating vernacular taxonomies of their own, according to qualities they thought should be recognised. One letter to the editor described the anger and sadness the writer felt every time the term *social group* was heard on radio or television. 'Of course, not everyone can be classified as the same', the writer conceded, but why should the classification be based on job title or income, and not 'personality'? Somewhat paradoxically, the writer then classified him- or herself as belonging in the non-existent social group 4, 'since I am weak and handicapped' (C. L., 1965). In the late 1950s, 'Worker In Aspudden' wrote an open letter to the head of the SCB with the request 'Away with the social groups! Away with all kinds of class divisions'. In his view, the head of the SCB was 'a worker like me', because both performed honest work. He then generalised this to apply to the whole population: 'We are all equally good citizens of the same state' (Arbetare i Aspudden, 1959).

An interesting proposal came from a Bengt Lindqvist, who wrote a long letter to the conservative newspaper *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1973, developing a new social group taxonomy to better capture modern society. The political sphere and trade unions were adapted to the needs of the three social groups, but societal changes meant that more and more people were now unrepresented, he argued. His vision was a system of class divisions based on the concept of supply and demand in the realm of care (*vård*). He divided the three social groups according to the resources they provided to the commons, mostly through taxation. The three new groups were the large, medium, and small contributors/caregivers, while beneficiaries (students, pensioners, children, the unemployed, people on sick leave, and social welfare recipients) were assigned to social group 4. Care recipients, like the hospitalised, were placed in social group 5, while those permanently unable to fend for themselves were placed in social group 6. This act of naming, of creating a new taxonomy, would, Lindqvist believed, lay the groundwork for the emergence of unions and political organisations that could represent these groups (Lindqvist, 1973).

As we have seen, women wrote in to debate the social group taxonomy. Early on, there were critiques about the gendered nature of the way in which experts classified people into social groups, and of who was made visible as a result. In the 1950s, for instance, the Single Parents' Association emerged demanding to be counted as a separate social group. This development started when Greta Liljefors, who worked in the publishing industry, wrote a letter to *Svenska Dagbladet* in 1958 after the publication of a survey regarding how a fee increase for day care would affect the various social groups. In the survey, single mothers were counted in a separate category. 'I have long … claimed that we single mothers have fallen out of the social group division', Liljefors said, remarking that she now had it in black and white: 'We are outcasts – in all possible contexts.' She criticised how the 'gentlemen who investigate' – officials, statisticians, social scientists – always assumed that there were two parents in a household. That someone could be both a single mother and a wageworker was unthinkable to them, she observed (Liljefors, 1958). In another article published a couple of years later, Liljefors argued that the practice of asking only for the husband's social group in surveys gave an incorrect picture of society. Although political debate increasingly assumed that men and women had equal rights and value, she concluded, practical applications of this lagged behind (Liljefors, 1965).

This feminist critique of practices around surveying and polling arose from public engagements such as Liljefors's published letters and the media interest they garnered, not from within the ranks of officials or sociologists. Liljefors founded an organisation to work for societal visibility. Among other things, the Single Parents' Association was aimed at easing the financial burden on single parents, as well as eradicating prejudices about them. To this end, they sent out surveys to their members to chart their living situations, producing statistics for official recognition. Social group 4 became a category used by the association to signal society's ill-treatment of them as the lowest of the low, but that also functioned as a mobilising collective identity (Maria, 1959). Here we see a desire to be counted, to be part of a taxonomy that would ensure political and social visibility.

Conclusion: Popular class taxonomies and their transformations in the press

This article contributes to our knowledge of the social taxonomies and class languages of the post-war period. Through a focus on the media life of the Swedish social group taxonomy, I have demonstrated the interconnectedness of and interactions between expert knowledge and class languages. In my view, class needs to be understood as a phenomenon that is constructed and enacted through knowledge production, within governmental social statistics, the social sciences, market research, and opinion polling, among others. The next step in the analysis has been to show how the social taxonomies needed for these knowledge practices were mediated in the press to a wider public and thereby transformed.

After its invention in the early 20th century, the social group taxonomy became widespread in post-war Sweden. In an era in which the Social Democrats dominated in government, governing on a platform of democratising and redistributing resources and public goods, knowledge technologies such as the social group taxonomy were used more than ever in order to measure inequalities. This expansion of knowledge production in turn influenced both people's self-descriptions and public debate. One area in which this article has made an empirical contribution to the history of the Swedish post-war welfare society – often seen as an exemplar of the social democratic polity – is in its analysis of the continuing interest of many actors in classing the population. These classification practices, I argue, should be analysed within a larger framework that does not focus only on the Social Democrats. Social scientists, bureaucrats, market researchers, and the press all contributed to making the social group taxonomy a dominant way for Swedes to understand the structure of their society.

The press was an important arena for circulation and meaning-making around the social group taxonomy, and the empirical results of the article cast new light on how similar formalised class divisions in other countries can be studied. One way in which the meanings attached to the system deviated from the experts' understanding can be seen in those cultural commentaries that framed the social group taxonomy as a ploy, a euphemism designed to hide that Sweden remained a class society. Others saw the classification as evidence that Sweden had ascended to a social group society, governed by softer demarcations between people. Another way in which new meaning was created was the taxonomy's presentation by some journalists as a means of designating cultural differences. Families and individuals constructed as representatives of their social groups were interviewed in order to personify the statistics. The press made the taxonomy into something relatable that people could recognise and connect to their own lives. At the same time, other parts of the press – editorials, for example – rejected the taxonomy for being inaccurate and arbitrarily constructed. In addition, intellectuals compared it to other methods of classification. I argue that these texts were intended to cultivate a reflexive stance towards social taxonomies, alerting the reader to their artificial nature. This reflexivity concerning social divisions is something we also see in letters to the editor during the post-war period. The social group taxonomy was consequently both widely used and openly criticised, and for many Swedes it remained unclear who was doing the classifying and why – reflecting the conflicted ways in which different actors understood the social structure.

Finally, the general public engaged with the social group taxonomy, creating meaning around it in new ways. In letters to the editor, 'vernacular languages' of the system abounded. As we have seen, this does not mean that expert and popular understanding of class were two separate spheres. In attempts to promote their own taxonomic principles, people used the social group taxonomy to discuss society in terms that extended beyond the intentions of experts. In these instances, we see how the taxonomy became a resource for many types of actors. People used it to make sense of their own situations, articulate political claims, argue for better ways to classify society, or advocate the elimination of undemocratic categorisation practices altogether. In a situation similar to that which Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has found in 1960s Britain, some decried the notion of class as part of an undemocratic classifying mentality. According to these people, in using the taxonomy, officials and social scientists attributed differential values to people in an illegitimate way.

Social taxonomies are gendered in the way people are counted and classified, and in how the knowledge created through them is used. In the Swedish context, engagements in the press gave rise to a feminist critique of experts' classification practices. Some charged that only counting the father when designating a family's social standing made mothers invisible in academic and administrative knowledge production, and, as a result, in public discourse. Moreover, it skewed the results of surveys not to consider women's paid and unpaid labour when researching households. To be counted within a social taxonomy could therefore mean societal visibility.

The prominence of the social group taxonomy in the Swedish press diminished in the 1980s and 1990s. Mounting criticism had led more and more knowledge-producing institutions to turn to other methods of classification. Divisions such as 'low-income earners' versus 'high-income earners', 'insiders' versus 'outsiders' in the workforce, and 'uneducated' versus 'educated' people took hold in tandem with new political projects. Much remains to be studied about class taxonomies as an important facet of political, scientific, and cultural histories of the 20th century. They were tools for constructing social order for some, and debating and criticising the polity for others – forging different paths in how publics understood and acted upon society.

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