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WELFARE AS A MEANS FOR POLITICAL STABILITY: A LAW AND SOCIETY ANALYSIS

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Abstract

There have been extensive discussions in academic circles of why some countries develop into welfare states while others do not. Two main factors mentioned in these discussions are economic growth and the need for political stability. In these discussions, the example of Sweden, where the welfare state allegedly emerged from a ‘culture of consensus’, has often been treated as an historic exception. In this article we discuss the relevance of the two main factors suggested in the literature, and investigate whether Sweden is a rare case of a country where welfare arose out of a culture of consensus or if welfare in Sweden emerged as a product of strategies that aimed at promoting political stability, and thereby followed a similar pattern to other Western European countries. In undertaking this task, we have conducted a review of the literature and used Migdal’s ‘state-in-society’ perspective and the ‘institutional approach’ as a theoretical framework. Our results can be summarised under three headings: (a) until the mid-twentieth century, Sweden was a highly unstable, conflict-ridden class society, and thereby a followed similar pattern to other Western European countries; (b) welfare reforms in Sweden were introduced as a means of addressing political and social instability; (c) Sweden is therefore no exception to the theory that deep political crises trigger welfare reforms.

Keywords: labour history; law and society; political stability; social policy; Sweden; welfare

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1. INTRODUCTION

There have been extensive discussions in academic circles of why some countries develop into welfare states while others do not (Cameron 1978; Esping-Andersen 1990; Flora and Heidenheimer 1981; Therborn 1983; Titmuss 1958). Two main factors mentioned in these discussions are economic growth and the need for political stability. Studies claim that when countries become richer, they are more likely to expand the scope and coverage of their welfare programmes (see e.g. Cameron 1978; Castles 2000; Cutright 1965; Wilensky 1975). Another account gleaned from the scholarly literature claims that the more politically unstable countries become, the more likely they are to broaden the scope and coverage of their welfare systems (see e.g. Alesina and Glaeser 2004; Esping-Andersen 1990; Myles 1984; Wilensky 1975).

In these discussions, where it is argued that the welfare state in Sweden emerged from a 'culture of consensus', the Swedish case is treated as a historical exception. In a literature review by Nyzell (2009) it is argued that scholars like Åberg (1998), Österberg (1989, 1993) and Thullberg and Östberg (2006) described Sweden as a country whose domestic politics in early modern and modern history were shaped by non-violent ideas, a spirit of consensus and a willingness to compromise. Thullberg and Östberg (2006), for example, argue that the transition from an agricultural to an industrialised 'welfare' society in Sweden was 'swift but peaceful – there have been no revolutions – and, from a foreign point of view, at least, political unity has been striking'. Likewise, Eva Österberg (1989, 1993) argued that the 'Swedish model' had its roots in a political culture of negotiation and consensus going back to the sixteenth century. Similarly, Lars Magnusson (1996, 2006 cited in Nyzell 2009: 111) claimed that 'social and political conflict and collective violence were virtually non-existent in 20th century Sweden...'. These interpretations imply that Sweden always was a land characterised by the 'culture of consensus', and that the welfare state naturally and peacefully emerged from a society where social unrest was virtually non-existent.

In this article we discuss the relevance of the two main factors (economic growth and the need for political stability) suggested in the literature and also ask whether Sweden really is an example of a welfare state that emerged as a result of consensual principles and values. In so doing, we try to reflect critically on the literature that indicates that security and stability threats were largely absent in Sweden during its transition from an agricultural to an industrialised 'welfare' society. We thereby challenge the dominant view that the development of welfare in Sweden can be regarded as unrepresentative of Western Europe as a whole. In trying to accomplish this task, we have conducted a literature review and drawn on the 'state-in-society' perspective and the 'institutional approach' to provide a theoretical framework.

MAIN RESEARCH QUESTION

In this study we aim to investigate whether Sweden is a rare case of a country where welfare arose out of a culture of consensus or if welfare in Sweden emerged as a product of strategies that aimed at promoting political stability, and thereby followed a similar pattern to other Western European countries.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This article uses Migdal's (1988, 1994, 2001) 'state-in-society' perspective and the 'institutional approach' (George and Wilding 1990; Rex 1961) as a theoretical framework for understanding the relationship between political stability and welfare. Our decision to combine these perspectives allows us to foreground the importance of both social norms and social conflict.

A central idea in the 'state-in-society' perspective is that state and society are not separate entities; rather, they are intertwined entities that engage in mutually transforming interactions. According to Migdal, Kohli, and Shue (1994), 'states are parts of societies. States may help mould, but they are also continually moulded by, the societies within which they are embedded... Societies affect states as much as, or possibly more than, states affect societies'. From this perspective, the state is just a sprawling organisation within society, and not very different from other informal or formal social organisations, and coexists symbiotically with those other social organisations. States face enormous resistance from social forces in implementing their policies, since their laws and regulations must compete with the norms of other social structures that promote different versions of how people should behave. Likewise, Migdal (2001: 51) claims that states are not always the autonomous principal agents of macro-level societal change they are portrayed to be; rather, their autonomy, the outcome of their policies, the behaviour of their functionaries, and their coherence, are largely shaped by the societies in which they operate. As state organisations come into contact with other social forces, social forces induce the state to adapt to different moral orders.

There is strong support for Migdal's perspective in the 'institutional approach', which is based on the social conflict model of society (George and Wilding 1990; Rex 1961). According to the institutional approach, society consists of classes and groups with conflicting interests, and social policy measures are fundamentally the result of conflicts between various social forces in society. Governments may be pressurised by these conflicting social forces into introducing social policy legislation or alternatively governments may be elected in order to introduce such legislation. Rex (1961) argues that conflicts between classes, groups or political parties in society can be resolved in one of three ways: in the interests of the ruling class, in the interests of an oppressed or exploited group, or in a compromise that modifies the position of the ruling group by making some concessions to the oppressed group. These compromises, which Rex

(1961: 129) defines as 'truce situations', are characteristic of the outcomes of conflicts in welfare states.

Armed with the 'state-in-society' perspective and institutional approach, one possible inference is that the development of welfare states in Western Europe was triggered off by security threats posed by various social forces. From this perspective we argue that, in attempting to explain the development of welfare in Sweden, it is important to take the 'political stability' perspective into consideration.

3. USING SWEDEN AS AN EXAMPLE OF WELFARE STATES EMERGING OUT OF A 'CULTURE OF CONSENSUS'

The image of Sweden, propagated both nationally and internationally through the idea of 'the Swedish Model', has been of a country whose domestic politics, in early modern and modern history, were shaped by non-violent ideas, a spirit of consensus and a willingness to compromise. Much previous research on the origins of the Swedish welfare state has been influenced by this understanding. Much of the literature emphasises the relative lack of major revolts and other forms of social upheaval in Sweden in its transition from an agricultural to a 'welfare' society (see e.g. Åberg 1998; Andræ 1998; Larsson 2005; Lerbom, 2003; Magnusson 2006, 1996; Österberg 1989, 1993, 1996, 1998; Thullberg and Östberg 2006). The bulk of these studies argue that, while Germany, France and England experienced violent social and political conflicts from early modern times, there were comparatively few similar events in Sweden (Larsson 2005; Österberg 1989, 1993, 1996, 1998). Hence, these studies conclude that Sweden is an exception to the theory that deep political instability promotes welfare reforms.

Another account gleaned from scholarly works locates the origins of the welfare state in the predominantly agrarian structure of Swedish society in the early twentieth century, i.e. the recognition of the free peasantry as an independent estate and the influential role played by independent farmers in the bicameral parliament (Baldwin 1989; Edebalk 2000). Other historians of the welfare state claim that it was influenced above all by German social policy reforms (Carlsson 2002; Olsson 1986, 1990), while Knudsen (2000) links it to the influence of Lutheranism. Some scholars emphasise the social legislation and employment policies of the Social Democratic Party as the main basis of the universal welfare state in Sweden (Johansson 1974 as cited in Olsson 1986; Valocchi 1992; Vyllder 1996); others characterise it as resulting from the political influence of the labour movement (Esping-Andersen, 1985); and scholars such as Hecló (1974), Österberg (1989, 1993, 1996, 1998) and Weir and Skocpol (1985) trace it back to its origin, i.e. to the bureaucratically-centred monarchical regime, which existed from the seventeenth to the early twentieth century and which created analytically competent and politically consensual decision-making structures.

Despite the large diversity of scholarly explanations for, and approaches to, explaining the origins and development of the universal welfare state in Sweden, most studies have arrived at a similar conclusion that the development of the welfare state in Sweden was a consensual and non-violent process, a development characterised by mutual understanding, consensus and compromise, this being the rule from the 1540s to the twenty-first century. However, as we demonstrate in subsequent sections, the Swedish case was no exception to Western trends; rather, social policy developments in Sweden between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century were largely influenced by instances of political instability and threats posed by various radical social forces.

4. INTERNATIONAL TRENDS REGARDING WELFARE BETWEEN THE LATE NINETEENTH AND MID-TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The take-off for the modern welfare state in the West occurred in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when industrialisation reached its apex. Industrialisation placed workers in an unfavourable position by making them heavily dependent on wage labour, thereby creating social tension. According to Pampel and Weiss (1983), the growing dependence on wage labour created new problems among vulnerable groups with little or no labour to sell, such as the old, the sick, and the very young. Working-class organisations, such as unions and early social-democratic political parties, often posed an apparent threat to the established political and social order (Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996). Similarly, poor wage and labour conditions were fertile ground for the labour movement to organise general strikes.

Prior to World War I, smaller European countries, such as Belgium, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland, only possessed tiny armies, and as a result, labour uprisings effectively threatened the entire nation (Alesina and Glaeser 2004: 7–8). Therefore, threats posed by an organised working class and other social forces had a profound effect on social reforms of the time, through the perceptions and interpretation of elite actors powerfully situated in or around the state (Rueschemeyer and Skocpol 1996). Due to the emergence of a strong organised working class, new attempts were made in Western countries to come to terms with destitution, particularly among the industrial workers. In the face of these growing problems, as de Neubourg (2006) claims, keeping nations together by covering all inhabitants under some form of social system was the major concern of Western policy-makers when establishing the framework of social protection systems in the pre-war period. Germany and Great Britain were among the first Western nations to use welfare policies to counter political and social instability associated with industrialisation. The willingness of governments to provide relief to the poor depended less on acute need than on perceived threats to social stability (Piven and Cloward 1971). The implementation of

the world's first welfare state in the 1880s by Otto von Bismarck in Germany reflected these trends. Bismarck's social policy reforms were intended to maintain an archaic social order and to create the conditions for the smooth functioning of the capitalist system and the political domination of conservative elites (Baldwin 1989: 5; Olsson 1990). In this connection, most studies trace the initiation of the welfare state, or at least the beginning of its early development, to the large-scale social insurance schemes introduced by Bismarck during the last quarter of the nineteenth century (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981). Thus, the welfare state project was the primary instrument used by Western governments to address the growing social problems that arose during industrialisation (Esping-Andersen 1990: 8–29; Mishra 1990: 96–119).

Until the Great Depression of the 1930s, Western welfare systems mainly prioritised poor relief programmes. The traditional categorisation of the poor into 'the deserving' and 'the undeserving' was an essential feature of these programmes. However, the Great Depression rendered this categorisation largely irrelevant. It had devastating effects in almost every country, including those in Europe; it seriously affected both rich and poor, and private institutions were simply unable to meet the needs of households. As a result, it was accepted as proven, both in Western Europe and the USA, that poverty was not an individual problem but a structural one that should be addressed by the government. Wilensky (1975) asserts that even welfare state laggards such as the USA joined the international trend of introducing old-age pensions and unemployment insurance in the depths of the Great Depression. The New Deal, introduced by US President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, was a very important historic act, which prompted new welfare reforms, not only in the United States, but also in many European countries. The New Deal created what is currently referred to as 'welfare': federal assistance to poor families and their children (Cammissa 1998: 25) as well as social insurance programmes such as unemployment benefits and other welfare programmes that have enjoyed much greater political popularity than public assistance to poor families (*ibid.*). Hence, the rapid expansion of welfare states in the West was a logical outcome of the Great Depression.

As Van Langendonck (2007: 1) claims, the Nazis made welfare an instrument of their propaganda, pointing out how well workers were protected in Germany in comparison to Britain and the USA during the Great Depression. Although Hitler destroyed pro-socialist institutions, he did not curtail social service spending. On the contrary, he was a very aggressive redistributor who used welfare to build popular support and to increase the power of the state (Alesina and Glaeser 2004: 116). During World War I, social policy developments in Britain (Hurwitz 1949) and Germany (Feldman 1992) indicate that countries which faced threats to their political stability and security are more likely to introduce welfare reforms. This view is also held by Wilensky (1975) who claims that countries that are shaken by threats of this kind, particularly when they are losing battles and approaching total mobilisation, find the political will to introduce extensive social policy measures that encompass broad sections of the population. Even the term 'welfare state' itself was coined in Britain

during World War II when Britain stood almost alone in facing a military onslaught from Nazi Germany. As Marshall (1963) notes, the 1940s in Britain was a period of political instability, and the term 'welfare state' took root as the antithesis to the old poor law situation in which 'welfare' recipients, i.e. paupers, had lost their personal freedom and their right to vote. The term was therefore created to generate a new morale and discipline during the period of wartime crisis, although it subsequently came to be more closely associated with the social benefits that democratic governments hoped to provide once the war was over (Flora and Heidenheimer 1981: 19). The studies of Briggs (2000) and Titmuss (1958) also demonstrated that World War II was oddly egalitarian as, in Western countries, it gave rise to the impetus to introduce extensive social policies. Thus, the welfare reforms in Europe that came shortly after the Second World War mirrored wartime experiences. Europe saw a rapid growth of welfare states, and welfare programmes started to develop in rights-based directions. Governments in both Western Europe and the USA came to realise that welfare plays a crucial role in preserving political and social stability. This example raises the possibility that the development of welfare states and the formation of politically stable nation-states in Western Europe were closely associated.

Social policy developments in Sweden between the late nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century were heavily influenced by state elites' and capitalists' motivations to mitigate political and social instability. As Olsson (1990: 84) noted, 'late 19th century social contradictions were a blend of pre-modern-rural and modern-industrial cleavages in which mass popular movements played a crucial role in the formation of a domestic social policy discourse'. This phase of the early social policy 'breakthrough' was rooted in Sweden's domestic radicalism of the 1880s, which was influenced by German imperial *Kathedersozialismus*, the radicalism of the French revolution, Marxian socialism, Fabianism and Anglo-Saxon liberalism. In this regard, the existing political order was challenged by the ideology and the social forces of the time (Olsson 1990: 84). This perspective is also shared by Nyzell (2009, p. 123) who claims that early modern and modern Sweden may appear to have been peaceful on the national level, with no large-scale social and political violence, but at the local level, instances of social and political violence were widespread. There were many popular and radical struggles for a different Sweden before the birth of a modern labour movement and the Social Democratic Party. The existing political and social order was under attack from many directions, as various socialist, liberal, radical, revolutionary, republican, utopian and anarchic ideas flourished and clashed during this period (Edgren and Olofsson 2009: 5–6). As Lundberg (2009) describes, nineteenth century Sweden saw the emergence of a strong radical political tradition which started in the 1830s and 1840s and continued until the 1930s. The radical tradition gave birth to innumerable riots, social strife and political violence, with popular demands for democracy and a republic (1848), widespread food rioting (1855, 1867–68), a major constitutional reform implemented only under the threat of revolution (1865), the New Liberal Party (1867–71), and the universal suffrage movement of the 1890s,

syndicalism in 1915–25, and violent labour strikes in 1908–17 and 1925–32 (Edgren and Olofsson 2009). In the following sections, we demonstrate more specifically the role played by welfare in addressing political and social instability in the building of Sweden as a nation-state.

5. INSTANCES OF POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND WELFARE REFORMS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY SWEDEN

5.1. THE TULLBERG MOVEMENT

Prior to industrialisation, Sweden was one of the poorest countries in Europe. Its per capita income was well below the average of Northern and Western European countries (Vylder 1996). It was a predominantly agricultural country until the early part of the twentieth century and over three-quarters of the population eked out a scant existence from semi-arctic agriculture (Scase 1977: 16). More than 50 per cent of the population lived in rural areas and worked in agriculture, forestry, fishing, etc. (Lundberg and Amark 2001: 157); the people were sharply divided into four estates: nobles, clergy, burghers, and farmers (Carey and Carey 1969: 464). Out of a population of about four million at that time, more than one million Swedes emigrated to North America in search of a better life between 1865 and 1910 (Vylder 1996). In contrast to other European countries such as Germany, France and the UK, industrialisation was relatively slow in Sweden as it did not reach ‘take off’ until the 1870s (Scase 1977: 16).

Sweden was a highly conflict-ridden class-divided society between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries (Edgren and Olofsson 2009; Johansson 2002; Sundell 1997; Tidman 1998). Due to the emigration of more than one million Swedes to North America and rising social and economic inequalities in rural areas, the legitimacy of the existing ruling regime came under strong attack. As Åström’s (2000) study has shown, there was also growing criticism at the time of the social policies that had begun to develop with regard to poor relief. Society’s obligations to provide for the poor were vigorously called into question, and social legislation during the nineteenth century became much stricter. This scepticism was rooted in moral, ideological and economic considerations, and there was a growing perception that poor relief was being abused. It was even claimed that rights to poor relief were a cause of poverty while, under the influence of a growing liberal doctrine, it was asserted that state intervention should be reduced as far as possible, providing a justification for restrictive social policy legislation (Jägerskiöld 1955). The arbitrary and restrictive nature of social policies appears to have generated strong tensions and debates within various layers in Swedish society regarding the role and obligation of government to provide welfare for its citizens. These debates were primarily centred on the question of whether poverty is a societal (structural) problem or the responsibility of the individual.

As described by Olofsson (2009: 55), Sweden experienced severe political and social disorder due to crop failures in 1867–68, two years known in Swedish history as the ‘years of dearth’. Crop failures resulted in hunger, poverty, and the first wave of mass emigration to the USA, and subsequently led to massive hunger riots, demonstrations and strikes in urban areas of Sweden: Gävle (1867), Göteborg (1868), Hudiksvall (1869), Kalmar (1867), Karlshamn (1867), Norrköping (1867), Skellefteå (1867), and Stockholm (1867–69); Trollhättan (1868) and Västervik (1867). As Olofsson (2009) describes further, disorder even spread to the rural areas of southern Sweden – including Skåne – the location of the “Tullberg Movement” (*Tullbergiska rörelsen*). Ostensibly this movement consisted of tenant farmers and the rural poor making claims of land ownership on the large estates, but it might more accurately be portrayed as a movement of the landless, rural proletariat, since most of the members of the movement were in fact not tenant farmers, but landless poor. The movement claimed that estates which were largely owned by the nobility, legally belonged to people from the lower orders. This struggle over land ownership became more disruptive and violent and the wave of resistance swept across the countryside of Skåne. Evictions and arrests were forcibly resisted, and occasionally there was a need for military involvement when evicted tenants moved back into their old farms or harvested their old fields. There were several accounts of gunshots, assault, cattle maiming, arson, and even a bombing incident. As Olofsson (2009) notes, demonstrations and strikes on such a large scale had not been observed before, while hunger riots were an established practice.

The Tullberg movement, figuratively and literally, moved to Stockholm, the capital of Sweden. Its members petitioned the King, Parliament and individual members of Parliament for an intervention, writing in the press and financing a newspaper of their own. Unjustifiably high rents, mass evictions and poverty were core issues in their writing. In the movement’s view, the nobility had a very clear obligation to guarantee the welfare of their tenants and their families and in this they had obviously failed. The King was also seen to have a responsibility for maintaining the economic well-being of his people, and even more importantly, for upholding the law. The movement therefore was underpinned by a rich popular culture centred on the right of landownership and the social obligations of kings and noblemen. Although the movement took place during the ‘years of dearth’, its origins were more profound and complex than that. It was a reaction to the destructive effects of agrarian capitalism on the social and economic life of tenant farmers and the rural poor. It was the largest social conflict over landownership in Swedish history (*ibid.*).

5.2. RADICAL POLITICAL TRADITION

Although radical and critical political traditions were not new to Sweden in the 1850s, there was an upsurge in radical activity around the year of European revolutions of 1848 and this was largely connected with the ineffective public administration

system that failed to address economic and social problems of that time. As a result, radical political ideas and movements became the crucial locus of society. Despite being divided by ideological disagreements, radical political groups had a common ambition to challenge an *ancient régime* and a society based on inequalities (Lundberg 2009). Several radical newspapers were also established in Stockholm, *Fäderneslandet* being the most popular, which presented a mocking critique of contemporary Swedish society (Edgren, 2009). Among the failings of society, as Lars Edgren writes, *Fäderneslandet* identified ‘...warped office-holders, a greedy Government, a rotten polity, obsolete institutions, twisted customs, and a neglected, uncared for economy’ (Edgren 2009: 17).

As Lundberg (2009: 44) shows, during this politically unstable period in Sweden, the Swedish Sharpshooter’s Association (*Skarpskytterörelse*) became a popular movement. Radical democratic sharpshooting ideology was founded on the belief that a democratic society must be based on an armed and autonomous people. He claims that the formation of a widespread and popular Swedish Sharpshooter’s Association in the 1860s was a concrete threat to the existing social order. In his interpretation, the Swedish Sharpshooter’s Association, in addition to their popular ideas and demands, had a key political agenda in developing a nationalistic vision of an armed and independent ‘people’ who could challenge the *ancient régime* and demand reforms, a republic, and representative democracy.

5.3. THE IMPACT OF TULLBERG MOVEMENT AND RADICAL SOCIAL FORCES ON WELFARE REFORM

As the aforementioned example illustrates, there was strong criticism in nineteenth-century Sweden of rising social and economic inequalities. There was also growing criticism of poor relief programmes that had become very restrictive. The arbitrary and restrictive nature of social policies had generated strong tensions and debates within various layers of Swedish society regarding the role and obligation of government to provide welfare for its citizens, thereby leading to a crisis of legitimacy in the political system. One of the main demands of the demonstrating masses during the Tullberg Movement was a living wage, and this had far-reaching implications for political and social reform (Olofsson 2009). Olofsson (2009: 73) notes that ‘the nineteenth century saw the emancipation of tenant farmers and their land in country after country, often after social upheaval and strife in the countryside. Serfdom was abolished, and social and political rights expanded’. The threat posed by the Sharpshooter’s Association was also one of the important contributing causes of the modest reform of the Swedish Constitution in 1866, which abolished the diet of four estates and introduced a representative assembly of two chambers (*ibid.*). Thus, the Tullberg Movement and the Sharpshooter’s Association can be seen as a reaction to growing economic and social inequalities, and played a pivotal role in pushing for the social reforms that came later on. The threat posed by violent revolutionary social movements was a

crucial factor in the push for welfare reforms. Having felt the threats posed by radical social forces, the Swedish authorities had to look for alternative solutions to enhance the image of the state as an agent of social justice and equality, and thus to remedy political and social problems. Social policy measures were seen as a viable solution to growing inequality and social discontent. This perspective reinforces Korpi's (1990: 4) argument that 'the reduction of inequality has long been one of the explicit goals of social, fiscal and economic policies in Sweden'.

These examples illustrate that struggles for welfare in Sweden did not start with the labour movement or with the Social Democratic reforms, but that early welfare reforms were initiated by policy-makers as an antidote to threats posed by various radical social forces, such as the Tullberg Movement and the Sharpshooter's Association. As Lundberg and Amark (2001: 157) claim, the debate over modern social policy started in Sweden in the 1880s. It was partly motivated by Bismarck's social policy reforms in Germany, but also, increasingly, by devastating social problems, such as poverty, emigration, social and economic insecurity on the one hand, and urbanisation, industrialisation and the introduction of capitalistic wage labour on the other. It is therefore very likely that threats posed by radical social forces had a profound impact on the perceptions and activities of the Swedish policy-makers when devising social policy strategies. As we will show in subsequent sections, the radical political tradition also had far-reaching repercussions on the actions and strategies of the labour movement in the period 1880–1940.

6. LABOUR MOVEMENT AND WELFARE REFORMS (FROM THE MID-1880s UNTIL THE 1930s)

6.1. LABOUR CONFLICTS AND THE SWEDISH SYNDICALIST UNION (SAC)

The whole period between 1880 and 1940 was a period of social and political conflict in modern Swedish history (Johansson 2002). There was strong conflict even within the labour movement itself (Blomberg 2009). Syndicalism existed as an alternative to the reformist labour unions and as Blomberg (2009: 102–104) describes, there was a quest for dignity at the core of syndicalist action. By rejecting both reformist labour unionism and bourgeois society, syndicalists aspired to change society through revolutionary action and to create a different social order (*ibid.*). The Swedish Syndicalist Union (SAC) achieved wide popularity among workers, particularly quarry workers, forestry workers and miners, as they moved away from reformist trade unionism to the SAC (Persson 1975; Åmark 1986; Blomberg 2009). Syndicalism considered ordinary strikes too costly; instead, non-agreement and direct action, such as the use of sabotage, depopulation and blockades, were the syndicalists' preferred methods (Blomberg 2009: 81).

As Korpi (2006) argues, due to the absence of alternative action, the Swedish labour movement 'had to fight on the labour market using strikes for better pay and against reduced wages as their main weapon' until the 1930s. As Korpi notes, Sweden recorded the largest number of strikes and lockouts in Western Europe. The first major labour strike occurred in 1879, and this was followed by nearly three decades of strikes, union building, and socialist activity culminating in a general strike (Scott 1977; Valocchi 1992: 195). The turbulence of Swedish labour conflicts was higher than anywhere else in the world between 1900 and 1913 and did not subside until the mid-1930s (Ahn 1996: 154). As Johansson (2002: 29) points out, Malmö (1926), Halmstad and Ådalen (1931) experienced violent conflicts where people died or shots were fired. Under these circumstances, Sweden could have fallen into the trap of fascism or revolution from below (Ahn, 1996). There was a real potential for revolution, and this was a genuine fear for both the state authorities and the reformist labour movement (Andrae 1998 as cited in Hilson 2009: 146). As Eva Blomberg (2009) writes, bomb factories, political outrages and the Amalthea bombings were still fresh in the memories of capitalists. The Russian revolution of 1917 also increased their concerns over social developments, so that, to ensure the security of their business, capitalists began to use social policy strategies with the aim of creating stable communities and allaying social unrest (Blomberg 2009: 102). Welfare legislation was seen as a workable solution, since only through extensive welfare measures was it deemed possible to address the growing social problems of the time.

6.2. THE IMPACT OF SAC AND LABOUR CONFLICTS ON WELFARE REFORMS

In the light of the growing threat posed by the syndicalist movement, as well as turbulent labour conflicts, many Conservatives and government ministers in the 1890s looked to Bismarck's social policy reforms in Germany as an example of national legislation that could effectively mitigate unstable political developments and promote economic efficiency and industrial peace (Olsson 1990: 113; Schiller 1975; Valocchi 1992: 195). The German legislation provided the international community of legislators, administrators, employers, workers, and academics with a model (Kuhnle 1981: 127). Reaction to German social insurance legislation was swift in Sweden: it inspired the first comprehensive social insurance bill, introduced in 1884. The introduction of various forms of scarcity compensation and perquisites (e.g. rent allowances, firewood and milk, potato patches and electricity, medical care and medication) by employers was aimed at diminishing the threat posed by the syndicalist movement (Blomberg 2009). Thus, most of the early welfare reforms, particularly the reform of pensions, were motivated by the concerns of Conservatives and bureaucrats over industrial unrest (*ibid.*). The adoption of the Factory Inspection Act (1889), the introduction of state subsidies to voluntary sickness benefit societies (1891, 1910), employers' liability for reimbursement in

cases of industrial injury (1901), universal and compulsory old age and invalidity pensions (1913) and compulsory occupational injury insurance (1916) were all results of this instability and reflected the state's efforts to quell ever-increasing labour and social unrest (Olsson 1986). A similar perspective is shared by Edebalk (2000: 548) who argues that turbulent labour conflicts and stigmatising poor laws were major contributing factors to the development of welfare state in Sweden. The basic pension, introduced through legislation in 1913 and covering practically the whole population, was one of the most important outcomes of these instabilities (*ibid.*).

Welfare in Sweden thus arose in the conjuncture of a German invention and the growth of social or popular mass movements – teetotallers, religious freethinkers, consumer co-operatives, and trade unions, under rapid industrial progress in towns as well as in the countryside – not to forget massive emigration across the Atlantic (Olsson 1990). Thus, it can be argued that the appeal of a nationally organised 'welfare state' project actually originated from the concerns of local capitalists, who were dependent on the state for controlling labour unrest and popular insurgencies (Valocchi 1992: 195). It is safe to say that political stability and security seem to have been the central aims of the policy-makers and law-makers when they established the skeleton of a welfare state in Sweden. However, in emphasising the importance of the 'political stability' argument, other goals such as such as the market-dynamics of social policies should also be acknowledged. Edebalk's (2003) recent work shows that Bismarck's social insurance was strongly connected to the aim of pacifying the workers; at the same time Edebalk warns that the market-dynamics of welfare were and are as important in Germany as they are in Sweden.

7. THE IMPACT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC POLICIES ON WELFARE REFORMS

7.1. THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND THE ÅDALEN SHOOTINGS

Like most other countries, Sweden was severely hit by the Great Depression of the 1930s. Unemployment was very high, and the threat of a severe political and cultural crisis was also widespread in Sweden, as elsewhere in Europe (Berggren 2002: 411). Unemployment, which was around 12 per cent in 1930, rose to 34 per cent in 1934, and this, in combination with reductions in wages, caused a series of strikes and other social conflicts (Vylder 1996). Rapidly growing unemployment posed a challenge to the legitimacy of the Social Democratic government. In the face of the Social Democrats' obvious inability to address workers' problems, more radical organisations like the communists and the anarcho-syndicalists gained wide popularity within the labour movement (Hilson 2009). As described by Johansson (2001), the lack of

decent working conditions and the problems of rising unemployment resulted in violent conflicts between workers and the public authorities in Ådalen on May 13, 1931, when five strikers were killed by troops who were protecting strike-breakers at the sawmills. This tragic incident escalated tensions even further, leading to the establishment of a Communist 'Soviet Republic' at Ådalen which actually ruled for a couple of weeks. The Social Democratic Party accused the government of being responsible for the murder of these workers (Wilensky 1975). Following this incident, a huge labour demonstration took place in Stockholm and similar demonstrations, involving more than 2,000 people, took place at the autumn fair in Eskilstuna in 1937; these were largely directed against police officers (Nyzell as cited in Hilson, 2009: 151). These events sent shockwaves around Sweden, and the shootings at Ådalen were regarded as a result of the Great Depression, reflected principally in the rising levels of unemployment (Hilson 2009).

7.2. THREATS OF FASCISM AND SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC REFORMS

As Berggren (2002: 411) claims, the Great Depression of the 1930s could have opened up political opportunities for fascism in Sweden, since there were several fascist organisations with radical political agendas. When fascism reached its apex in the mid-1930s, the Swedish National Socialist Party (SNSP), uniting more or less all the fascist movements in Sweden, had 30,000 members,¹ and enjoyed financial guarantees. Moreover, another right-wing extremist movement, the Swedish National Federation (SNF), had 40,000 members. The SNF represented the ideological width of anti-democratic ultra-nationalism in Sweden (*ibid.*). According to Hilson (2009), the threat of fascism exerted a strong influence on Social Democratic Party leader Per Albin Hansson's decision to start negotiations with the Agrarian Party in April 1933. Having won the election in 1932, in 1933 the Social Democratic Party formed an alliance with the Agrarian Party (The Crisis Agreement), which gave it the parliamentary majority necessary to push its innovative economic crisis policy through parliament and to initiate social reforms (*ibid.*). The Crisis Agreement of 1933 also enabled the Social Democratic Party to compel the capitalists and the labour movement to negotiate, and this eventually led to the *Saltsjöbaden Agreement* in 1938 (Korpi 2006; Nyzell 2009). The Social Democrats looked to the approach of the British economist John Maynard Keynes (known as Keynesian economics) as a viable instrument for overcoming the depression. Keynesian economics asserts that extensive state intervention in the economy through fiscal and monetary measures can effectively alleviate the adverse effects of business cycles, economic recessions, and depressions. In this regard, Sweden enjoyed a reputation throughout the 1930s for being the first country to make use of an 'active' fiscal policy for dealing with unemployment (Winch 1966: 168).

¹ Out of a population of 6.5 million.

7.3. STEPS TOWARDS WELFARE STATE

Wilensky (1975: 73) notes that these events constituted a national crisis that brought the Social Democrats and The Farmers' Party to power and formed the foundation for an accelerated development of the most celebrated welfare state of our time. Therefore, when investigated closely, Sweden may not be an exception to the theory that deep political instability triggers welfare reform. Solow's (1960) systematic comparison of the pre-tax distribution of income in four European countries and the United States showed that, in 1935, Sweden had the most unequal distribution of income amongst the countries compared but ended up, in 1954, with one of the least unequal. What triggered this achievement in equality was the convergence in 1931–32 of a deepening depression, the Ådalen shootings, and a political scandal involving the corruption of the former Prime Minister Carl Ekman prior to the 1932 election (Wilensky 1975).

It should be noted that most of the welfare laws were introduced during and after the Great Depression when Sweden was shaken by labour strikes and threats posed by fascist and communist movements. These were real threats to the existing political system, and the Social Democratic government was aware that rising unemployment and poor social conditions might provide fertile ground for fascist and communist groups to attract aggrieved workers. The adoption of extensive welfare measures in the 1930s reflected this reality. For example, an unemployment insurance scheme which was state-supported and union-based was introduced in 1934 in response to the threat of unemployment, and the pension system was improved in 1937. A variety of new provisions, namely home-furnishing loans, subsidies for housing construction, housewives' vacations, benefits and medical services for mothers and young children, an annual two-week paid vacation period and school health programmes were introduced during this politically unstable period (Korpi 1990). As Korpi (1990) notes, these pre-war years gave rise to a large number of welfare laws that aimed to counter poverty and social inequalities. Although the development of the Swedish welfare state took off in the years after the Second World War, the foundation of the welfare state was built during the 1930s when Sweden was on the verge of political and social disorder. What is notable is that welfare initiatives of this period were shaped by the concerns of the Social Democratic government with threats posed by various radical and fascist groups, and that the Social Democrats deployed welfare strategies in order to maintain political stability and neutralise possible social unrest.

As Hilson (2009: 134) claims, 'the 1930s marked a watershed between the "bad old days" of poverty and repression, and the construction of new, modern Sweden'. By introducing a package of social protection measures, macroeconomic and public work, and retraining policies, the Social Democrats succeeded in overcoming recession more effectively than most other countries (Vylder 1996). Public employment policies were integrated into welfare policy (Valocchi 1992). The Social Democrats made extensive use of social expenditure and public works programmes to reduce unemployment. While pre-depression welfare policies mainly prioritised poor relief programmes,

post-depression policies were qualitatively different from previous policies, in the sense that they involved less means-testing and covered broader sections of the population.

Welfare in Sweden seems to have emerged as a product of strategies which aimed at promoting political stability, and thereby follows similar patterns to other Western European countries. However, an interesting question that needs to be addressed is why Sweden (and other Scandinavian countries) developed into the archetypal social democratic welfare state, when other Western nations did not. One of the key explanations can be found in the Swedish parliamentary situation during the early part of the 20th century. There were twelve different governments in Sweden between 1920 and 1932, and none of the political parties was able to form a majority government. Towards the end of this period there was a shift within the Social Democratic Party away from the most radical left. This shift was initiated as a result of internal conflicts resulting in the left wing of the party becoming marginalised. This shift also had effects on the Swedish trade unions, which suddenly became much less inclined to enter conflicts.

In 1928 the Social Democratic party achieved a poor election result and was ridiculed by the right wing parties, one of which described its members as 'Russian Communists'. This was followed in the 1930s by a steady upsurge in fascism in Sweden. As noted above, these events exerted a strong influence on Social Democratic Party leader Per Albin Hansson's decision to start negotiations with the Agrarian Party in April 1933. The alliance with the Agrarian Party gave Social Democrats the parliamentary majority they needed to implement social reforms and so weakened the position of other radical parties. However, due to their alliance with the Agrarian Party, it was very difficult for the Social Democrats to pass social legislation without considering the interests of farmers. As Esping-Andersen (1990: 30) notes '...where farmers were politically articulate and well-organised (as in Scandinavia), the capacity to negotiate political deals was vastly superior'. Therefore, Social Democrats had to introduce welfare legislation that benefited both farmers and the working class. These efforts represented an attempt to expand the sphere and legitimacy of the Social Democratic Party by including more and more of the population under the welfare system. Gregory Luebbert, in his study of interwar Europe, claims that the role of independent peasants was a salient factor in determining the political outcomes of the 1930s, including those in Nordic countries. According to Luebbert (1991 cited in Hilson 2009: 148), 'where the "family peasantry" made common cause with the working class, as it did in the Nordic countries, the result was social democratic hegemony; where the peasantry instead formed an alliance with the urban middle classes, however, the result was fascism'.

These developments form the context which led to the social reforms that ensured almost half a century of uninterrupted dominance (1932–76) for the Social Democratic Party. Swedish welfare politics developed into an archetypal 'social democratic welfare state', balancing political demands in terms of social justice and fair distribution of

wealth, not least from strong and well-organised labour unions, with maintaining a market economy. Most of the welfare benefits followed the model of general social welfare support, guaranteed by law and administrated by government agencies. The objective of welfare law developed by the Social Democrats was characterised by universalistic welfare programmes mainly supporting the whole population with sick-benefits, pensions, child-support etc., rather than directed only to poor people (Åström 2000). This was undoubtedly a successful strategy, both in promoting political stability and in securing parliamentary power. Although many critics have emphasised the potential weaknesses of the Swedish welfare model in responding to recent economic and political pressures, pointing to the so-called 'welfare state crisis', Svallfors' (1995) shows that popular support for welfare state arrangements remained robust in Sweden at different time periods (1981, 1986, and 1992), despite a high tax burden and extensive bureaucracy. By implementing welfare reforms, the Social Democratic Party succeeded in transforming Sweden from a conflict-ridden to a consensus society, eventually resulting in a politically stable and democratic nation-state.

8. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The aim of this article is to investigate whether Sweden is a rare example of a country where welfare arose from a culture of consensus. In undertaking this task, we conducted a literature review and used the 'state-in-society' perspective and the 'institutional approach' to provide a theoretical framework. We have argued that the Swedish case is not an exception to the theory that deep political crisis triggers welfare reforms. As the findings of our study have indicated, uprisings and violence, aimed at the revolutionary restructuring of society, were an important part of the political agenda in pre-modern and modern Sweden, and the potential for radical political action from other groups in society was often present. Thus welfare reforms in Sweden constitute a project by policymakers for promoting political stability and security in times of crisis. However, while emphasising the centrality of the 'political stability' perspective, we do not exclude the importance of other factors, such as economic growth.

Although much of the literature presents the development of the welfare state in Sweden as a consensual and non-violent process, our findings indicate that, even in the Swedish context, welfare reforms were initiated in response to political and social conflict. From a comparative perspective, there may have been little actual political instability on Sweden's road to a welfare state, but if welfare is said to have been the outcome of a 'culture of consensus', it was only so because the political establishment was brought to the 'consensus' table at gun point. Consequently, Wilensky's (1975) 'guns-and-butter' argument seems to be relevant when trying to explain the development of the welfare state in Sweden. The Swedish consensus model is really imagined history and does not account for its actual development; Sweden, like other

European countries, was a highly unstable, conflict-ridden class society until the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, there were many radical protests against established society from the mid-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century – for example, the radical democratic movements of the nineteenth century like the Sharpshooter’s Association, the Tullberg Movement of the 1860s, syndicalism in the early twentieth century, the communist movement, violent labour strikes during the 1920s and 1930s, and fascist groups. The Social Democratic government initiated a series of welfare reforms with the aim of promoting social order and political stability. From this perspective, the main findings of the study seem to confirm the theoretical proposition that social policy measures are fundamentally the result of conflicts between various social forces in society.

Our results can be summarised under three headings: (a) until the mid-twentieth century, Sweden, like other European countries, was a highly unstable, conflict-ridden class society, and there were other alternatives for radical political action in Sweden; (b) welfare reforms in Sweden were introduced to ‘buy off’ the sympathy and loyalty of citizens towards the state, and served as a means for mitigating political and social instability; (c) Sweden is therefore no exception to the theory that deep political crises trigger welfare reforms. Similar points have been made before by scholars such as Berggren (2002), Edgren and Olofsson (2009) and Wilensky (1975), and our research could be said to support their findings, calling for a more nuanced understanding of welfare state development in Western societies. However, by investigating the development of welfare states from a ‘political stability’ perspective, our research does differ from previous research. By using this perspective, it emphasises the importance of welfare reform as a ‘political stability’ project in the development of the democratic nation state in Western Europe. The development of the welfare state in Sweden was largely driven by the need for political stability rather than by the ‘culture of consensus’. Sweden is one of the few countries in the world where people do not regard government as an evil, but see it as an agent of development, and that this is the case demonstrates that the welfare state can successfully serve as a ‘political stability and security’ project in a country that has suffered from chronic political instability and insecurity.

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