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Reconsidering the Role of Farmer Politics in Swedish Democratization

*Erik Bengtsson**

Abstract

In discussions of Scandinavian democratization, it is commonplace to argue that long-standing farmer representation in parliament and a lack of feudalism encouraged a democratic-participatory civic culture within the peasant farmer class – or perhaps in the population as a whole. The present essay questions this interpretation in the Swedish case. It centers on a re-interpretation of farmer politics at the national level from a two-chamber system of representation after the 1866-67 reform to the alliance between the farmers' party and Social Democracy in 1933 and offers a new analytical account of the way that one class's attitude to democratic inclusion can change over time, owing to changed political and economic relationships to other classes. I show that Swedish farmers did not organize themselves independently of nobles and land-owners until the 1920s, and that they did not play the role of an independent pro-democratic force. On the contrary, the broad-based organizations of farmers in the 1920s and 1930s, with their democratic, participatory culture, appear to have been heavily influenced by the political culture of liberals and the labor movement, which in democratic society opened the door to a re-shaping of Swedish farmer politics that abandoned the old (subservient) alliance with estate owners. It was not democratic farmers who gave rise to Social Democracy – rather, it was Social Democracy that caused farmers to become democratic. Understanding farmer politics correctly also opens up a new understanding of the determinants of Swedish democratization.

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Keywords: democratization, agrarian politics, Sweden, class structure, farmers, *Sonderweg*

JEL codes: N53, N54, P16, H10

1. Introduction

Why did Sweden become a stable democratic country in the 1920s and 1930s? And why did a Social Democratic model, rather than a more liberal model, evolve? In the most prominent explanations, farmers play a key role. For comparative sociologists such as Esping-Andersen (1985) and Luebbert (1991), the political choices made by farmers during the Great Depression are the key (also Kane and Mann 1992, p. 443). While farmers in Germany supported Fascism, in Scandinavia they went into coalitions with Social Democracy, entailing Keynesian economic policies and building welfare states. Other researchers also focus on the farmers as the key group for (social) democratic outcomes in this region, but look for deeper roots of the farmers' influence. In this stream of the literature it was not the red-green alliance of the 1930s that gave rise to democratic societies with generous welfare states, but rather the farmers themselves, with a tradition going further back in history. The farmers put the region on a democratic trajectory, because of material interests (Castles 1973; Tilton 1974; Baldwin 1990) or the existence of an influential farmer community with a political culture of egalitarianism (Stråth 1988; Trägårdh 1997, pp. 257-259; Stråth 2018). Views of an ancient "farmer democracy" in Sweden are typically founded on farmers' representation in parliament, and on their power in the parishes (cf. Kayser Nielsen 2008, pp. 152-157, 546). The agrarian-oriented account of Swedish democratization has something to say for it: 80 per cent of the Swedish population in 1900 resided in rural areas, and farmers constituted about a quarter of the population (SCB 1969, pp. 45-46; Bengtsson et al. 2018, Table 1). Hence, agrarian politics must be an important part of the story of Swedish democratization.

But this paper argues that, contrary to the conventional account, there was no steady contribution of farmer politics to democracy, no continuity from early modern peasant representation to twentieth century social democracy. This paper takes a step back and re-evaluates the role of agrarian interests in Swedish democratization c. 1866-1933. This span of time begins with the constitutional reform of 1866, which abolished the four estates diet of medieval descent and replaced it with a two-chamber parliament. The analysis ends in the 1930s, with the 'red-green' coalition of the Social Democrats and the Farmers' League. The period here considered thus straddles the key suffrage reforms of 1909 and 1918 and the

establishment of parliamentary (instead of royal) rule in the 1910s, which together made Sweden a democracy (Rustow 1969; Olsson 2000). The contribution of this paper is twofold. First, I provide a new analytical account of the changing stance of the farmer class with regard to democratization. The key factor is the class alliances that the farmers enter into – do they ally with the estate owners, as in 1867, or with the working class, as in 1933? Second, by investigating farmer politics, I contribute to the explanation of the democratic, and in fact Social Democratic Swedish regime outcome in the twentieth century, which has been much debated (cf. Luebbert 1991).

2. Democratization and agrarian politics

Analysis of macro-political change and democratization in relation to agrarian class structure has a long tradition. In Barrington Moore's (1966) influential analysis, the bourgeoisie, through its stereotypical association with liberalism (cf. Blackbourn and Eley 1984 for a critique), was the guarantor of liberal-democratic development. Researchers following Moore but focusing on Sweden have pointed out that historically its bourgeoisie was relatively weak, but the country still ended up on a liberal democratic trajectory. These researchers have then turned to the strength of the farmer class. According to Castles (1973, p. 327), who points to the unique peasant representation in the estates diet since the 1500s, "the peasants were already in the parliamentary arena, and could act as an important counterweight to plutocratic influence. /.../ in a sense, the farmers held the line until industrialism produced a liberal middle class capable of asserting its own rights." Tilton (1974, p. 565) similarly asserts that "in Sweden the peasants often played the role that the bourgeoisie played elsewhere as an agency for preserving the balance between the monarchy and the nobility"¹ (See also Alestalo and Kuhnle 1987.) Various versions of the peasant-legacies-guaranteeing-democracy thesis crop up in the literature; one example is the bald assertion that "Swedish traditions of peasant democracy helped to cement an alliance with the Peasants League in the 1930s which allowed the Social Democrats to form their first effective government" (Levy 1989, p. 210). Farmers' local political power in villages and parishes has often been located in the tradition of a peculiarly Swedish political culture of negotiation (Österberg 1989) and "peasant democracy" putting Sweden on a democratic *Sonderweg* (Aronsson 1992).

¹ The image from Tilton (1974) of a farmer-dominated relatively egalitarian rural economy in Sweden is reproduced also in the more recent political science literature (Ansell and Samuels 2014, Ch. 3), but it misrepresents the situation, and ignores the importance of the nobles (Bengtsson et al. 2018, 2019).

However, the present paper questions this proposed continuity from an early modern “peasant democracy” to the 1930s. The paper is mainly empirical, but a short discussion of the theory, or rather the assumption, of the connections between the farmer class and democratization is warranted. What kind of values can we expect farmers to have in common? What kind of general views can be derived from their socio-economic position and interest? As a bare assumption, I believe that the following works for a study of nineteenth and twentieth century farmer politics. Farmers value and defend their independence and try to sustain a lifestyle built on ownership and independence, which also yields an acceptable material standard of living, in relation to society as a whole. Rokkan (1967, p. 402) in his study of the Norwegian farmers’ party in the 1920s and 1930s was already pointing to a duality in farmers’ politics. On the one hand, they are fierce believers in private property. In defending property rights – and opposing (agrarian) trade unions – they sometimes unite with Conservative parties. On the other, they want to uphold their material living standards, and when the market does not guarantee these, farmers may demand protectionism, subsidies and state regulation, which can all carry them into alliances with labor politicians who support state regulation of the economy.

The pendulum swing between defense of private property principles, and state regulation, is amply illustrated in the literature. In Lipset’s analysis Lipset (1971), conflicts with the world market and its fluctuating prices drove Saskatchewan wheat farmers to socialism, but the discontent with market slumps can, of course, also be channeled into far-right policies, as exemplified by Germany during the Great Depression (Farquharson 1976). Farmers have accepted and appreciated economic subsidies from the state in a variety of settings, which shows that *laissez faire* liberalism seldom is to be found among them, but at the same time they are inclined to be staunch defenders of private property. Farmers in commercialized economies recurrently run into problems and conflicts with banks, as in Sweden in the 1840s (Christensen 1997) or the nineteenth-century U.S., where the Populists organized criticism of the banks. The Populists also exemplify the common complaints with transport companies, especially with railroad companies (Sanders 1999). Middlemen and merchants form another source of frequent conflict, which in many contexts has caused farmers to create their own cooperative organizations, for example, the French *syndicats* (Berger 1972). But agrarian trade unions and labor movements can also push farmers into right-wing politics, as Cardoza (1982) notes in his book on fascism in the Emilia-Bologna region; Aasland (1974, pp. 81-83), too, shows that Norwegian farmers organized in the new

farmers' party after 1896 especially in regions with a clear divide between farmers and proletarians (cf. Alapuro 1988, ch. 7).

Farmers, then, may be involved in several areas of conflict in industrial society. Their “class interest” is not unitary and pre-determined, but must be articulated and organized, and the way that this takes shape is contingent upon the relative salience of the various conflicts. Existing farmer-oriented explanations of Swedish democratization take a static view of a class as a constant “thing”, instead of a relationship. In analyses such as Castles (1973) or Tilton (1974), the role of the farmers is constant over time – as carriers of liberal values or even, as in Stråth (2018, pp. 48-48, 56), “figures of equality”. This ignores the weight of the context as it varies over time. Instead, we need to consider the farmers’ relation to other classes in terms of political and ideological leadership. The class structure can affect political outcomes only via political mobilization that builds on the class structure. Here I am strongly influenced by an important argument by Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens, and Stephens (1992, pp. 100-1). They contend, following Lipset and Rokkan (1967, pp. 44-46), that farmers in Sweden organized independently of estate owners and thus were able to become a pro-democratic force. Following Moore (1966) in finding estate owners a naturally anti-democratic force, since they rely on cheap labor and tend to support the repression of workers to keep wages low (cf. Albertus 2017), farmers led by estate owners are assumed to have been nullified as a pro-democratic force. I am convinced by the theoretical argument but will show that it is empirically faulty for Sweden in the 1860s and later; only gradually from the 1900s on do the farmers found their own organizations and parties, and break free from the leadership of the estate owners. This also changes the content of their politics.

Swedish farmers – as they were, and as they have been perceived

Given the arguments of the preceding section, to understand the contribution of Swedish farmers to democratization, we need a basic understanding of their constitution as a class and their place in society. In mid-nineteenth century Sweden, where the empirical analysis of the paper begins, the definition of farmer (*bonde*), is a person who tills taxed farmland and is not a member of the nobility. In 1845, freeholders owned 60 per cent and farmers tilled 80 per cent of land (Gadd 2000). The discrepancy indicates the presence of a rather large group of tenant farmers. The nobility (0.5 % of the population) owned 17 per cent of the land, non-noble landlords owned 12 per cent, and the Crown 11 per cent. To be a farmer gave political rights: freeholders and crown tenants (but not tenants of the nobility), could vote for the

farmers' estate in the Diet. They also had political power in the parishes, which were responsible for poor relief, schooling and the like, along with purely ecclesiastical issues (Gustafsson 1989).² With the enclosure movements of the late nineteenth century, the village became less important as a political unit and the parish more important (Gadd 2000, pp. 208-210).

Farmer households in 1750 had constituted about three quarters of agrarian households, but by 1850 this share had shrunk to a half (Wohlin 1909; Winberg 1975), because the agrarian underclasses had grown substantially. These were largely composed of crofters – tenants with small plots of land to till on their own behalf, who mostly worked on the owners' farm or estate – and wage-earners on different kinds of contracts. Sweden experienced an 'agricultural revolution' of growing productivity from 1750 to 1870; farmers' wealth quadrupled in the nineteenth century (Bengtsson and Svensson 2018, Table 2). While the older literature on agrarian development emphasized the agency of agrarian elites, namely estate owners, more recent research insists that ordinary farmers also acted in an economically rational way to increase production and yields, for example, by arranging enclosures (Svensson 2006). Commercialization also grew in the second half of the nineteenth century, with increasing exports of oats to Britain and, after having to compete with cheap grains from America and Russia, increasing sales of butter and milk in the 1870s and 1880s. Besides exports, sales opportunities improved dramatically with increased industrialization and urbanization after c. 1870, at a time when a growing share of the population had to depend on bought food (Morell 2001, pp. 84-101). However, economic disparities within the farmer group also grew. Farmers in areas adjacent to cities or transport centers (such as ports) benefited more than isolated farmers, and the group of farmers with very small holdings grew substantially. To understand the politics of Swedish farmers c. 1850 we must, then, understand them in relation not only to cities and urban dwellers, as is conventionally done³, but also in relation to the agrarian upper class of estate owners, and a rapidly growing agrarian under class. We must also consider the growing socio-economic fragmentation within the farmer class itself.

² The parish as a political unit was replaced by the municipality in 1862. Voting rights in the municipality were awarded according to one's wealth and income. Until the 1900 cap on votes forbidding one person or corporation to control more than 5,000 or one-tenth of all the votes in the municipality, in rural municipalities wealthy persons or corporations could control tens of thousands of votes and single-handedly emerge with a majority (Mellquist 1974, pp. 115-136).

³ For example Carlsson's (1953) brilliant study of farmer politics in the 1890s is framed as "Farmer politics and industrialism", as if industrialism was the exogenous variable and farmers were reacting to it. Mohlin (1989) dogmatically follows the modernist-industrial paradigm.

3. Farmers as conservatives, mid-nineteenth century

The idea that farmers led the way in Sweden's road to democracy is related to the notion of its relatively early and harmonious democratization (cf. Bengtsson 2019 for a critique). To get the contribution of the farmers' right, we also need to get the democratization story right. It is important, then, to point out that the two-chamber system established in 1866, which replaced the four estates diet (nobility, clergy, burghers and farmers) descending from the mediaeval model was very undemocratic in practice (Nilsson 1969). The wealth and income censuses show that only about 20 per cent of adult men had the right to vote on the members of the second chamber and 2 per cent on the members of the first, which became an important guarantee of conservatism (Rustow 1969). The Second Reform Act of 1867 in Britain gave 59 per cent of adult men the right to vote; in Bismarck's Germany, all adult men had this right; and in Sweden's Scandinavian neighbors, 73 per cent of Danish men and 33 per cent of Norwegian men had the right to vote (Nerbovik 1973, p. 54; Østerud 1978, p. 210; Anderson 2000, pp. 5-6). Its 1866 reform made Sweden stand out as the least democratic. Furthermore, there were no major reforms of the system until 1909.⁴

Agrarian social movements and politics in the 1840s and 1850s: a Scandinavian comparison

What kind of policies did the farmer estate pursue in the final decades of the estates diet, before the 1866 reform? Following the arguments above, their relationship to the unrepresented classes is key. Smedberg (1972) and Olofsson (2008) have observed that the farmers represented in the four estates diet showed very little interest in protecting tenant farmers when they went on strike in the 1770s and the 1860s; tenant farmers, who did not have the right to vote, were assumed to be represented by their landlords. That freeholders and crown tenants in parliament showed no interest in the plight of the tenant farmers under the nobility betrays a certain lack of solidarity within the farmer class itself. It is also a telling comment on the farmers' attitude to the lower classes. Uppenberg (2019) shows that farmer

⁴ The limited voting rights in turn meant that the politicians elected were drawn from the wealthier strata of the population. The literature on Swedish political history typically describes the early days of the two-chamber system as one with "lords" in the first chamber and "peasants" in the second chamber (i.e. Nilsson 1994), but it has to be pointed out that no average farmers ever sat in the second chamber. Bengtsson and Olsson (2018) show that while farmer MPs in the 1840 and 1890 diets were three to four times wealthier than the average farmer in their home constituencies, in the 1895 second chamber, the average farmer MP was 7.8 times richer than the average farmer overall. Furthermore, farmer MPs often held substantial financial assets, such as stocks and bonds in banks and railroad companies. In other words, by 1895 "farmer" MPs in general were by no means representative of the "little man".

MPs in the 1840s and 1850s generally advocated harsh regulation of the work of proletarians, and acted to promote employers' interests, rather than as ideological liberals.

The thesis of a Swedish *Sonderweg* of long-standing traditions of peasant democracy assumes continuity: proto-democracy *then* (in the early modern period) evolved into democracy *now* (post-1920). But the actual convulsions of Scandinavian farmer politics in the 1840s and 1850s call for a more complex account. Whereas Norway and Denmark saw major pro-reform, pro-democratization farmer movements in the late 1840s, Sweden saw no such thing. Norway in these years saw the evangelically motivated but also socially rooted Thrane movement, while Denmark saw major movements of both farmers and semi-proletarians in agriculture (Østerud 1978, pp. 237-250; Pryser 1993, pp. 322-339). These movements succeeded in pushing through reforms, at least in Denmark: both a new relatively liberal constitution in 1849, and a new crofter law in 1848 which limited *corvée* labor (Engberg 2011, pp. 251-259). Strikingly, the Danish representation reform of 1849 was more democratic than the Swedish reform of almost twenty years later. Why, then, did Sweden lack such popular agrarian movements in the 1840s? Østerud (1978) explains this by reference to the “co-optation of the Swedish peasantry”, while Nielsen (2008, p. 156) in his Nordic comparison comments that ‘in a way, the Swedish farmers paid the price for having ‘first arrived’’. Here we must complicate the issues. Not all farmers paid equally – rather, the poorer farmers, the tenants of the nobility and the proletarian and semi-proletarian groups paid for the relatively generous inclusion in the system of the more wealthy farmers who were freeholders or tenants of the Crown (cf. Olofsson 2008, p. 251). The inclusion of parts of the peasantry meant – following a divide-and-conquer logic – that the farmers who had been included could unite with the upper classes and disregard possible chances of solidarity with unrepresented farmers and agrarian underclasses. To be sure, there were farmer MPs in the 1840s and 1850s who took a radical view, criticized fundamental injustice in society and proposed universal suffrage and universal schooling. But they, like the great radical and eccentric Sven Heurlin, were marginalized in an estates diet stuffed with privileged nobles and conservative clergy, along with burghers and farmers of mixed ideology (Christensen 1997). As we will see, the conservatism of Swedish elite farmers – the ones with a say in local and national politics – had lasting implications.

Civil society

Contrary to the Sonderweg assumptions of a continuity between the well-organized farmers from the villages and parishes of early modern Sweden and the twentieth century “consensus democracy” and corporatist solutions (Österberg 1989; Aronsson 1992; Sørensen and Stråth 1997), the civil society of mid-nineteenth century Swedish farmers is strikingly weak. The main organizations for agricultural improvement were very much top-down: the county-level *Hushållningssällskap* were according to statute led by the king’s man in the county, the county governor (*landshövding*) (Gadd 2000, pp. 334-336; Brandesten 2016, pp. 125-127). The agricultural meetings, venues for discussions to improve the industry that started in 1846, were dominated by the estate owners (Jonasson 2016). It is important not to impose anachronistic ideas of independent self-owning farmers on Sweden in the mid-nineteenth century, but to acknowledge that the farmers were both independent and in many ways led and dominated by the elite. In Denmark in the 1840s, 1850s and 1860s farmers took the initiative of holding their own agricultural improvement meetings and forming agrarian cooperatives. In Sweden, such independent organizing – so important for farmers’ democratic tendencies, as Lipset and Rokkan (1967) and Rueschemeyer et al. (1992) note – would not take place until the 1880s and 1890s.

Rustow (1969, p. 4) in his insightful book on Swedish politics from the 1950s describes Swedish society with the Swedish adjective “*genomorganiserad* – saturated with voluntary associations.” This is a succinct description of twentieth-century Sweden, but we must not suppose that the tradition is of ancient origin. The literature on the crucial period of transformation, the period of popular mobilization (in Europe) and constitutional reform from the mid-1860s onwards, complains that the Swedish farmers *did not* organize independently at the time (Brandesten 2005, pp. 134, 146). The image one gets of farmers’ organizing capacities in the mid-nineteenth century is on the whole distinctly unimpressive. Nyström (2003, pp. 46-50) in his study of a major potato-producing estate in the west of Sweden asks why, when the estate was up for sale in 1857, it was not split up into a multitude of farms, in this period of supposed farmer enrichment and advancement. Instead, the estate was sold as a whole to a bourgeois. Nyström’s answer is telling: the land was by turns damp and too dry, and needed an irrigation system to augment productivity. Such a project could not have been coordinated by farmers in the conditions of the time, Nyström argues: the village system had been broken up by the enclosures, and the farmers had no new traditions or cooperative organizations. Therefore, a single owner was the only economic form of ownership for those

lands. Given that Swedish farmers seventy years later became famous for their degree of organization and corporatist activity, Nyström's analysis is illuminating. The organizational landscape of the Swedish farmers in the 1860s and 1870s is less impressive than what is found in U.S. studies of the Granger movement, the Farmers' Alliance and related movements in the Midwest and the South (Hahn 1983; McMath 1985; Sanders 1999). The Grange might have been diverse and declined rapidly after its high point in the 1870s (Rothstein 1988; Baum and Calvert 1989), but it was a genuine farmers' movement – in Sweden, one could say that nothing of the kind appeared until 1927 (see section 5). Cooperatives emerged from the 1880s onwards, but a broader "farmers' union" did not emerge until 1927. As studies of the so-called popular movements – free churches, temperance and trade unions – in Sweden have highlighted, popular organizing in this country took root after 1870 in particular (Lundkvist 1977). The lack of connection between the older forms of farmer cooperation – work-sharing in the village, parish-level risk-sharing – and the producer and consumer cooperatives growing in importance from the 1890s has been noted (Osterman 1982, pp. 25-26; Brandesten 2005, p. 393). The lack of organization between farmers in the period between the old village system, and the popularity of organizing under capitalism also had implications for the political articulation of class consciousness.

4. The hegemony of estate owners: The Country Party, 1867-1904

Moreover, on the level of party politics, Swedish farmers in the mid-nineteenth century are 'disappointing' if we view them from a Swedish *Sonderweg* perspective. In Denmark and Norway, the farmers by the 1860s were organized in left-wing parties against the Conservative parties of the estate owners (Lund and Fog Pedersen 1970; Hornemann Møller 1992, ch. 4-5; Kayser Nielsen 2008, ch. 5-6). These farmers indeed played the role of democratizers, which we would expect from the literature. But the situation in Sweden was very different.

As discussed above, the farmers represented in the estates diet of the 1800s were drawn from the wealthier members of their class, and by definition excluded the tenants of the nobility. The relatively elite nature of the farmer MPs did not escape the attention of the many landed nobles who formed the noble estate. Already in the 1840s conservative estate owners called the Junker Party in the noble estate, were seeking a cross-estate alliance with wealthy farmers (Förhammar 1975). In the debate on representation reform, this Junker group wanted to keep the estates diet, but amend it (to include a gentry estate, for example), rather than

going for the more ‘liberal’ solution of a two-chamber parliament. To reach this solution, the Junkers, who saw that the farmer class was becoming richer but also more differentiated, and that the agrarian underclasses were growing, strove for a coalition with the wealthy farmers, to counter a possible liberal coalition of farmers and burghers.

The proposed coalition of estate owners and wealthy farmers failed in the 1840s, but succeeded in 1866, ironically enough when the coming two-chamber parliament, against which the Junkers had fought, called for new alliances. An exclusively noble party was no longer enough, and the nobles needed to seek new allies. Someone who realized this, perhaps earlier than anyone else was Count Arvid Posse, a conservative estate owner, vigorous opponent of the representation reform and ‘agrarian capitalist of the purest water’ – he had significant stakes in banking and industrial interests, and was a large exporter of agricultural products (Söderpalm 1997). He sought to organize a conservative opposition to the reigning ‘moderate-liberal’ (in practice quite plutocratic) government, on the lines of a rural identity (Thermaenius 1928, pp. 150-157). The common interpretation of Posse’s initiative to build an estate owner–farmer alliance, even in his own time, was that its main motive, if not vanity, was to nullify any possibility of farmer radicalism in the new two-estate chamber (Holmqvist 1980, pp. 88-89, 156; Bokholm 1998, pp. 144-147). Posse was chairman of a local bank; he owned parts of and sat on boards of companies in coal, cement and iron businesses, among others (Bokholm 1998, pp. 78, 95). He would easily fit into a Prussian stereotype of the fusion of agrarian and industrial interests in support of authoritarianism, ‘iron and rye’ (cf. Wehler 1973), but since he does not fit into the Swedish teleology, he has been ignored and the party formation for which he was crucial, the Country Party (*Lantmannapartiet*), is misrepresented throughout the international literature. For example, Esping-Andersen’s brilliant book (1985, p. 83) in a short discussion of the party commits two errors: “In 1867, the farmers formed the *Lantmannapartiet*, basically a liberal parliamentary group...” First, the party was formed by Count Posse and the gentry estate owner Emil Key⁵ with the help of Carl Ifvarsson, a farmer. Second, the party cannot be characterized as liberal. Both errors reinforce a preconception of the continuity of democracy in Swedish farmer politics – cf. Bendixsen, Bringslid and Vike (2018, pp. 12–17) for a recent reproduction of the erroneous image of the Country Party.

The party united in striving to shift taxation from land to the non-agricultural economy, and in an overall conservatism (Thermaenius 1928; cf. Morell 2001, pp. 115-117);

⁵ Tellingly, the biography of Emil Key by his loving daughter Ellen, a well-known author in her own right, states that Key’s first political action as a young man was to join a counter-revolutionary guard in 1848 (Key 1915-17, vol. I, p. 183).

the major issues of the very slowly working parliament of the 1870s and 1880s were taxation reform, increasing the share in the state income of non-land tax revenues, and the imposition of a conscript army (Hultqvist 1954). A good deal can be said about Posse's authoritarian personality and role in Swedish society; some basic facts must suffice. In the election campaign to parliament in 1869, he threatened his tenant farmers with eviction unless they voted for him, and manipulated the counting of votes (Olofsson 2008, pp. 130-131, 186); and when in 1867-69 a wave of tenant farmer strikes and claims to land held by nobles swept over the south of Sweden, where Posse's estate was located, he personally sued the leader of the farmers' movement (Olofsson 2008, p. 131). Even his biographer, whose admiration for his subject shines through on every page, admits that Posse's rule over his subordinates and over his party was authoritarian (Bokholm 1998, p. 399). That this man as party leader deliberately deferred all parliamentary decisions on suffrage extension when the issue arose should not be seen as surprising. It shows that the system defended by Posse and the Country Party was one of the most undemocratic in Europe.

The period after 1866 in Sweden must, then, be seen as one of landlords' hegemony over the farmers, in the sense that Gramsci (1971, pp. 57-58) used the concept to denote the intellectual, moral and political leadership of one class by another. In the nation's politics, the landlords – Posse, Key and the like – very directly through the Country Party led the farmers, and they led the agrarian improvement societies and meetings. Overall, it must be said that the Swedish nobility was much wealthier and more powerful in this period than is often assumed in interpretations of long-standing Swedish egalitarianism – cf. (Norrby 2005; Bengtsson et al. 2019). In their rhetoric the Country Party represented the ordinary people of the countryside (e.g. Peterson in Påboda, Petersson 1965, p. 70, “den jordbrukande menigheten”), but in practice they represented only the interests of estate owners and the wealthiest strata of farmers. The Country Party stood for the right of the master-employer to physically discipline his workers; vehement oppression of the trade unions (Bengtsson 2018); and the preservation of plutocracy in municipality and country. Nevertheless, later research on political history has uncritically reproduced an image of the Country Party as the representative of the “agrarian interest” tout court – in other words, has reproduced precisely the hegemonic claims of the leadership. To equate “agrarian interest” with what was in fact “the interest of the agrarian upper classes” is to reproduce exactly the hegemony that Posse *et consortes* so intelligently constructed and fought for. That the Country Party's anti-democratic politics was not the only possible agrarian politics of the time is made clear by any superficial comparison with the

concurrent American populists, railing against the kind of plutocracy that Posse and his colleagues upheld and indeed profited from (Sanders 1999; Prasad 2012).

The ancien regime and the Country Party

Again, to understand the contribution – or lack of it – of farmer politics to democratization, we need also to consider the wider picture of political-democratic development itself.

Analyses of party politics in Sweden in the final third of the nineteenth century tend to see the tariff battle of 1888 as a *tabula rasa* (Lewin 1971) and then stress the opposition between agrarian and urban interests (cf. Carlsson 1953, pp. 53-54; Rustow 1969, p. 41). However, it must be stressed that industrial workers lost more than any other group by the grain tariffs (Bohlin 2009) and that the working class was precisely the group excluded from politics. The tariffs in Swedish politics, as in German (Wehler 1973), were also a bloc-building device of the elite, strengthening the anti-democratic alliance. At the end of the 1890s, the Country Party, again united after a temporary split over the tariff issue, was a consistently conservative party opposed to any suffrage extensions and expansions of social policies, and traditionally conservative in its preference for the King and Nation (cf. Carlsson 1953, Ch. VI). Any farmer MPs of liberal bent had to join one of the Liberal parties.⁶

In the 1890s the conservative establishment ruled comfortably and quietly with the estate owner E.G. Boström as Prime Minister, steering the country with a “rikspolitik” heavily influenced by Bismarck’s uniting *Reichspolitik* (Nyman 1999; also Carlsson 1953, pp. 93-94, 210; Rustow 1969, pp. 38-39). Under the capitalist *status quo* of the Boström regime, to borrow a concept from Eley (1991, pp. 353-354), profits grew for industrialists and estate owners alike, and by 1900, wealth inequality was steeper in Sweden than in the United States, and on a par with the UK (Roine and Waldenström 2009; Bengtsson et al. 2018). Non-action can of course prolong a status quo in favor of the elites (Hacker, Pierson, and Thelen 2015), and this was the case in Sweden in the 1880s and 1890s. Popular mobilization against the status quo began to percolate through the country from the 1870s on, with the so-called popular movements – the temperance movement, the free churches and the trade unions. In the 1870s, 1880s and 1890s so-called *folkmöten* (popular meetings) started to be held in the

⁶ Of the 190 MPs in the second chamber of 1867, 23 were estate owners and 76 were farmers. In 1886, there were 11 estate owners and 99 farmers out of 214 MPs (Hartmann 1936, pp. 132-133, 148). In 1867, 7 estate owners and 59 farmers in the chambers were members of the Country Party; in 1885, 9 estate owners and 99 farmers; in other words, 78 per cent of the second chamber farmer MPs in 1867 were members of the party, and in 1886, 100 per cent. There were oppositional, democratic farmer MPs in parliament, especially in the 1880s and 1890s, but they were a small minority.

countryside with discussions before upcoming elections (Thermaenius 1928, pp. 249f; Carlsson 1953, pp. 36-47).

By the 1890s, popular organization had reached a serious level. In 1892 the suffrage movement collected several hundreds of thousands of names for a suffrage reform, but when the leaders sought to meet the prime minister, they were refused (Vallinder 1962, pp. 99-100). This insouciance and lack of interest in any popular mobilization are typical of Swedish conservatives during this period. The comment of a leading Country Party politician, Nils Persson in Runtorp, also tells us much: “the noise that they make at their suffrage meetings shows that they are not worthy of the right which they demand” (cited in Vallinder 1962, p. 65). Since the 1870s farmer MPs from the Country Party had also ceased to propose any reforms to the uniquely unequal suffrage system in place at the municipal level (Mellquist 1974, pp. 159, 178).

The agrarians and the Conservatives

The elite character of the Country Party is underlined by the fact that in 1904 it dissolved into the new Conservative party, with its electoral organization *Allmänna Valmansförbundet*.⁷ This “alliance of steel and rye” (Eriksson 2004, p. 57) confirmed that the propertied classes could indeed unite politically across sectoral borders, although throughout this decade and the next the party would show tensions between industry and agriculture (Eriksson 2004, pp. 59, 64, 75, 90). It is indicative of the differences in their class alliances in the final decades of the nineteenth century that the Swedish farmer party became a constituent party of the Conservative party, while its Danish and Norwegian colleagues became the main Liberal parties in their countries (cf. Rustow 1969, p. 41). The fusion of conservative forces into one united party also meant that when pressure from the Liberal-Social Democratic Party led to partial democratization in 1909, the farmers stood without a party of their own. This situation would not last.

⁷ More specifically, the Country Party became a second chamber wing of the Conservative Party. In 1912, it fused with another second chamber group to form the Farmer and Bourgeois Party (*Lantmanna- och borgarpartiet*). Cf. Eriksson (2004, pp. 65-68).

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

Ziblatt (2017) argues that the difference between Britain and Germany, which explains why democracy made steady progress only in the former, is that British Conservatives were organized in a strong party, which meant that they expected to win elections and stay in power under democracy. The German Right, Ziblatt argues, being less organized, had less trust in their electoral machine, and so they desperately fought democracy. As can be inferred, however, I am not convinced that the Swedish case, which Ziblatt also discusses, fits this explanation. The Swedish Right was by no means well-organized, either; they formed an extra-parliamentary party only in 1904, and this did not have much organizational reach. Instead, the key to the Swedish Right's acceptance of gradual democratic reforms rather lies in the imposition of constitutional guarantees, the continued role of the undemocratic first chamber in particular. Even after the 1909 reform which gave all adult men the right to vote for members of the second chamber (albeit on a 40-vote scale related to income and wealth), the first chamber still gave the elites a political veto (Olsson 2000, pp. 160-164, 284-285; cf. Ziblatt 2017, pp. 364ff).

An example of inspiration from Germany may illustrate the long-standing insouciance of the Swedish elites. In 1894 and 1895 the German *Bund der Landwirte* (BdL), famous in the literature on German political history for its pessimistic extreme-right influence, inspired Swedish estate owners to form two new organizations with far-right, protectionist agrarian politics, *Svenska agrarföreningen* and *Sveriges agrarförbund* (Carlsson 1953, pp. 162-164). Affiliated MPs in the second half of the 1890s pursued a nationalist line in relation to the union with Norway, proposed anti-trade union laws, and fought any democratizing initiatives (Carlsson 1953, pp. 220-234, 259, 289-292, 400). However, before 1903 this was a purely parliamentary organization. While the *BdL* in 1896 had 18 traveling agitators (Puhle 1967, p. 62), the Swedish estate owners saw no need for such populism: with such extreme restrictions of suffrage in place, there was no need for any popular mobilization or persuasion.⁸

By 1910, however, the splendid isolation of the 1890s was no longer an option for elite politics. Extra-parliamentary pressures had grown, and mass politics had undoubtedly made a breakthrough. This was shown in several ways: for one thing the membership of

⁸ Another telling example of the difference between German and Swedish politics in this period is that when the German government in 1899 tried to emulate the Swedish anti-union "Åkarp law" of the same year, parliament prevented the proposal from passing into law. Carlsson (1953, p. 297) comments that "In a country like Germany with universal suffrage and strong industrialization, such a class law could not be imposed through parliament."

socialist trade unions grew from 8,400 in 1890 to a high of 230,000 in 1905 (Bain and Price 1980, Table 7.1). Moreover, the free churches had been demanding a less privileged position for the Church of Sweden since the 1870s; in 1902 the trade unions mounted a three-day general strike for universal suffrage; the temperance movement in 1909 collected 1.9 million signatures supporting prohibition (Lundkvist 1974, pp. 44-45), and so on. Table 1 presents statistics showing the development of mass politics in Sweden. For comparison, the country had 5.1 million inhabitants in 1900 (SCB 1969, Table 4) and in the 1902 *riksdag* election, 180,527 men voted (Lewin 1971, Table 3).

Table 1. The development of mass politics in Sweden

Year	Activity	Number of participants
1895	Votes for a “People’s Parliament”	149,856
1897	Suffrage movement’s petition for general suffrage	363,638
1902	Political three day-mass strike for universal suffrage	~120,000
1909	General strike and lock-out	305,771
1909	Appeal for prohibition	1.9 million
1912	Sven Hedin’s militaristic brochure <i>Word of Warning</i> distributed	843,000
1913	Petition for female suffrage	351,000
1914	Farmers’ March: participants and signatures	~70,000
1914	Workers’ March	~45,000

Note. People’s parliament and suffrage petition 1897 from Vallinder (1962), pp. 90, 202. General strike 1902, see Branting (1927), p. 200. Strike 1909 from Kommerskollegium 1912. Prohibition appeal from Lundkvist (1974, pp. 44-45). Sven Hedin from Stenkvist (1987, pp. 246-248). Suffrage petition from Florin and Rönnbäck (2001, p. 16). Farmers’ march and workers’ march from Frykberg (1959), pp. 63 (31,000 marchers) and 81 (40-50,000 marchers in the counter-demonstration) and Bondetågets arbetsutskott (1914), p. 11 (40,000 signatures).

By the 1910s, even the Right needed to organize politically. In 1906, the Conservative party leader Lundeberg lamented that “The left is well organized, the right superior and indolent.” (Rustow 1969, pp. 72-73) But with the 1909 suffrage extension and the increased mobilization of Liberals and Socialists, the Right now needed to compete in mass politics too.

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

In 1911, the first election with the 1909 suffrage reform rules was held, producing a liberal-social democratic landslide at the expense of the conservatives. The lawyer Karl Staaff, who in 1906 had failed with suffrage reform, came back into government. The years of the second Staaff government compose perhaps the most turbulent and polarized period in Swedish political history. Staaff was seen by the Conservative establishment as completely unfit for office, according to his latest biographer, and the smear campaign against him was uniquely brutal: “it is fearsome how thin the varnish of civilization can be when the interests of the privileged are challenged” (Esaiasson 2012, pp. 108, 110, 119). Anti-Russian sentiment was rampant and the Conservatives insisted that military spending had to increase dramatically (Nyman 1957; Lindblad 2015).

The turbulent situation around the Staaff government would lead to a specific populist appeal in 1912-14. Here the policy issue of re-armament was conjoined with broader constitutional issues of constitutional reform. Since the 1880s, parliamentary principles – that the government should be responsible to parliament rather than to the King, as was Swedish custom – had slowly advanced (Brusewitz 1951; Nyman 1957; Sundberg 1961). The debate on royal rule versus parliamentary rule pitted Conservatives against Liberals. By the 1910s, this discussion had heated up in response to the geopolitical situation, and to the hatred of Staaff among the Right. This matters here because the revolt against parliamentary government, specifically a Liberal policy, took the form of a populist appeal to the “true nation”, which was symbolized by the farmer class. Eley (1991), building on the German case, provides a fascinating description of the situations in which populist appeals may gain currency.

“they are a signal that the ability of the dominant classes to speak for the 'people in general' has become impaired, normally through a powerful challenge from below or a breakdown of internal cohesion at the level of the power bloc or the state. In such situations attempts are made to find a new universalizing vision, in this case an ideal of national community amongst citizen-patriots” (p. 202).

Eley argues that this situation occurred in Germany in the 1890s. In Sweden, it occurred around 1911-14. We may recall that the election slogan of the conservatives in 1908 was “front against Socialism” (Petersson 1965, pp. 145-147; Esaiasson 1990, pp. 106-109). In the 1890s, Conservatives such as Boström and the Country Party politicians had simply ignored

Socialists and democrats, branded them as extremists who would be better suited to police repression than to political debate (cf. Langkjaer 2011). But by 1908, the Right also needed popular appeal, and saw the need to fight back against Socialism. The circumstances in which this occurred were tumultuous.

The explorer Sven Hedin, the last Swede to be ennobled, became a travelling agitator in the service of re-armament. In 1912-13, he toured churches, student unions and army regiments, and his wealthy sponsors also paid for the mass distribution of a million militarist brochures, *A Word of Warning (Ett varningsord)* in 1912. The millionth copy was, symbolically, given to one of the princesses (Stenkvist 1987, pp. 246-248, 267-284). Hedin in the brochure disparaged party politics and the “new men” of the Liberal government, and instead sought to speak to like-minded fellow-citizens who had not “been blinded by party feuds” and could “stand outside of the political quarrel” (Stenkvist 1987 provides an in-depth analysis of Hedin’s rhetoric). “Party politics” was the target of invective for conservatives in the 1910s (Elvander 1961); instead, Hedin, in line with populist tradition, appealed to the true Swedish people, and warned of a future in which the fatherland was occupied by Russian troops. His warning that the “German race” must stand against “invasions from the east” (Stenkvist 1987, p.287) would not have been out of place in the German extreme right organizations mapped by Eley (1991). In 1912-13, no fewer than two initiatives appealed for funds from the public to pay for the battleships that the Liberal government did not want to build. The mass circulation of Hedin’s brochure and the fund-raising for the battleships signified something new in Swedish conservative politics: a more popular (and populist) approach.⁹

It was in this atmosphere that the estate owner Uno Nyberg and the merchant and estate owner Jard Frykberg planned an initiative, which would be known as the Farmers’ March.¹⁰ The acknowledged motive was to convey the farmers’ support for the King, as master of the government. The government traditionally acted as the King’s councilors, but

⁹ Luebbert (1991, p. 72) argues that the second Staaff government’s fall was due to the rural-urban split, specifically over military expenditure. However, the Farmers’ March should not be seen purely as a valid expression of rural opinion; rather, it was an orchestrated effort by the Right. The fight against the Staaff government should be seen as a Left-Right split. The misreading of the 1914 conflict as a rural-urban one shows up the wider tendency to see agrarian elites’ expressions as representative of their sector *tout court*; compare the interpretations discussed above of the Country Party as “the agrarian interest”.

¹⁰ For the general background see Nyman (1957); for an insider account, see the book by Frykberg’s daughter (Frykberg 1959) which to a large extent builds on his notes from 1913-1914. Frykberg and Nyberg certainly were no ordinary farmers, but they wanted to appear as such. Both Nyberg and Frykberg in their speeches in the Castle courtyard used the concept “odalman” to describe themselves and the marchers; see the official publication of the March, *Bondetåget till Stockholm den 6 februari 1914*. The King addressed the participants as “Ye honest men of Swedish farmer stock!” (Frykberg 1959, p. 68). (*I redlige män av Sveriges bondestam!*)

the Liberals led by Staaff now wanted to transform Swedish politics into a parliamentary system, where the government was appointed to act for the majority in the riksdag (Brusewitz 1951; Johanson 1997). To push backwards from this development, oust Staaff and restore the King's power over the government, Nyberg and Frykberg saw as the best way forward a "Farmers' March" in support of the King and the Army. In a nationalist-romantic demonstration of power, farmers from all over the country should travel to Stockholm and march to the royal castle to demonstrate their support for the King. The organizers very deliberately played on the romantic conception of farmers as the genuine people. They turned to the distorted nationalist history-writing of the day, portraying the bonds between farmers and the King as strong throughout Swedish history, especially during the revered "Great Power" period of the seventeenth century (cf. Hall 2000, pp. 118-125, 215-217). The instructions to the participants included a ban on top hats (Nyberg and Frykberg 1914) – farmers or not (and the participant lists reveal that many in fact were not farmers), the March was to give a "popular" impression.

Romantic visions aside, the project naturally required complex logistics: to convey the farmers (and other supporters) to Stockholm, to house them and feed them. Handily, the organizers were well-connected members of the elite and could count on the support of the state railroad company (for 35 specially chartered trains), and of the army and wealthy citizens of Stockholm (for housing in barracks and private homes), the state church (for a morning service for all participants in churches all over the city), and the best restaurants of the capital (for a gala dinner for all the participants). About 30,000 participants, farmers and others, travelled to Stockholm before the set date of 6 February. Even before the morning Church service, those participants allotted to working-class neighborhoods were already complaining about the taunts and harassment they had faced from political opponents (cf. Schürer von Waldheim 1914, p. 159; Frykberg 1969, p. 75), but still the day was in general a nationalist-autocratic feast. On the appointed day the leading liberal daily *Dagens Nyheter* (6 February 1914, p. 9) reported from the preparations that Stockholm had not seen such excitement and fun since the summer of 1912, when the Olympic Games were held there. At Stockholm Castle, King Gustav V met the marchers in the main courtyard, where he markedly referred in his speech to "my army" and "my government", indicating his stance against parliamentary rule and for royal power; to accommodate all the participants the Prince made the same speech in another courtyard. The entire day was a powerful manifestation of the unity between the traditional elites – the church, the army, the universities, the crown, and the large landowners. Even those who could not be in Stockholm could celebrate. 45,000 or so

signed a petition to show their support of the March (Schürer von Waldheim, p. 4), and the celebrations in the two old university towns of Uppsala and Lund are also eloquent. In Uppsala, where 1,200 of the university's 1,800 male students signed a petition in support of the March (female students were not allowed to participate); a cathedral service in support was followed by a party with music by the popular chorus Orphei Drängar in the main building of the university, where the guests heard a speech from the rector. In Lund a large patriotic party was arranged at the Museum of Cultural History, with speeches by leading professors of the university (Frykberg 1959, p. 75; Skoglund 1991, p. 125; cf. Schürer von Waldheim 1914, pp. 43-49).

Liberals and Social Democrats were affronted by this celebration of and invitation to a royal power grab, and two days later 50,000 counter-demonstrators crossed Stockholm in a Workers' March against the farmers and in support of parliamentary principles. But Prime Minister Staaff, in the face of open opposition from the King, the Army, the Church and the conservative elites, found his situation untenable and resigned. His government was replaced by an "apolitical" conservative government, a "de facto royal council" (Svegfors 2010, pp. 42-52, 88). The "Farmers' March" was not a farmers' initiative, but it came to shape agrarian politics in the years to come.

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

In February of 1914, the politicized farmers were pitted against the workers and Social Democrats in fierce political combat, with far-reaching consequences. To celebrate the first anniversary of the Farmers' March, 6 February 1915, a new agrarian party was founded: the Farmers' League (FL) (Mohlin 1989, pp. 49-57). The party was devoted to defending the rural way of life, and its ideology in the 1910s and 1920s was heavily infused with authoritarianism and the race ideology of its day (Torstendahl 1969). However, only 18 years later, in the political aftermath of the Great Depression, the Farmers' League entered into a coalition government with the Social Democrats (SAP), thereby cementing a Social Democratic power which was to persist (Esping-Andersen 1985). In exchange for guaranteed prices for agricultural products, the FL accepted the SAP's proto-Keynesian economic policy and nascent welfare state project, in the so-called 'cow trade' (Nyman 1944). How could there have been such a turn-around: from the almost militant opposition of 1914 to the coalition of 1933?

Conventional accounts would ignore the discontinuity of farmer politics in the turbulent 1910s, assuming instead that the 1933 coalition sprang out of an older cooperative tradition between farmers and workers (Esping-Andersen 1985, p. 314; Sørensen and Stråth 1997). A proper contextualization rather highlights the need to explain this U-turn in farmer politics. (We should also note that the SAP hesitated to seek a coalition with the FL, which they feared was infested with authoritarian ideas – cf. Nyman (1944, pp. 26-59), Isaksson (2000), pp. 128, 202, 239-245.) A central part of the explanation for the FL's shift comes from the biography by Jacob Bjärdsdal of Axel Persson in Bramstorp, the leader of the Farmers' League from 1934-1949. Bjärdsdal points out that the 1933 coalition resulted from a palace coup within the FL: the septuagenarian party leader Olsson in Kullenbergstorp was a staunch conservative and fierce opponent of Social Democracy, but his internal opponents, led by Bramstorp, went behind his back, undermined his authority within the party, and signed a coalition with the SAP (cf. Nyman 1944). The generational shift within the FL was not only a question of age, but of shifting political socialization. The younger generation, says Bjärdsdal (1992, p. 124; cf. 181), represented a 'new sort of farmer'. The new farmer was optimistic, educated in folk high schools¹¹ and a member of a free church, the temperance movement and especially farmers' organizations such as the cooperative movement. Bramstorp had never been attracted by the Farmers' March and its blood-and-soil rhetoric; the elitism of counts and barons in his home district Scania had put him off the Right; thus in 1914 he was a Liberal Party politician. (Kullenbergstorp on the other hand had been the leader of the Scania section of the Farmers' March: Schürer von Waldheim 1914, p. 122) This also meant that when the Depression hit, Bramstorp was a leading farmer politician who still had fond memories of the 1918 Liberal-Social Democratic coalition in support of universal suffrage. *This* was the continuity from the 1910s to 1933.¹² Beyond the personal importance of Bramstorp's liberal past, however, we must look at the wider social context: the agrarian schools, the popular movements and the cooperatives.

¹¹ "Folk high school" is an educational institution linking high school and college, which has played an important role in modern Scandinavian history. See Kayser Nielsen (2008), pp. 276-283.

¹² K.G. Westman, one of the main negotiators of the FL in 1932-33 and later Minister of Justice, is an exception. He was a lawyer who had been a politician for the Conservatives and after the Farmers' March joined the new FL.

The social and material basis of the “new farmer”

Above, I have stressed that in the mid-nineteenth century, following the break-up of the villages but before the spread of any popular movement, the farmers were relatively isolated and disorganized. By the 1930s, this had changed fundamentally.

In the 1880s, the increased intensity of investment in agriculture led to the first formation of farmers’ cooperatives; they were set up to cut prices, especially of concentrate and fertilizers (Thullberg 1979, p. 10; cf. Osterman 1982, pp. 26-30). However, the producer cooperative movement picked up pace only after 1900. The move to dairy production in the 1870s and 1880s in response to the global fall of grain prices also led to nascent dairy cooperatives; the first was started in 1880 at the Hvilan folk high school, but the movement took off in the 1890s. The number of milk producers in the cooperatives grew from 40,000 in 1890 to 100,000 in 1914; at this time, cooperative dairies handled 68 per cent of the milk produced. Cooperative slaughterhouses grew in much the same way (Rydén 1998, pp. 65-79).

Sweden clearly lagged behind its Nordic neighbors in appreciating the importance of retail cooperatives for farmers. In the consumer cooperatives, the workers and urban liberals were completely dominant until the 1910s. In 1910, 50 per cent of the members of Finnish consumer cooperatives were farmers, while in Denmark the figure was 73 per cent, but in Sweden it was only 8 per cent (Ruin 1961, p. 198). If we see social capital and cooperative spirit as conducive to the formation of cooperatives (O’Rourke 2007; Henriksen, McLaughlin, and Sharp 2015), then we must confess that the Swedish farmers lagged behind the Danes in this respect. However, by the 1920s, the Swedish farmers were playing a key role in retail and producer cooperatives. At the same time, since the 1870s they had often been organized in free churches and temperance movements. In both these institutions, they had repeatedly found themselves in opposition to state power. The increased marketization and differentiation of the farmer class in the post-enclosure period of Swedish agriculture had finally been complemented by new social organizations and cohesions (Lundkvist 1977; Bengtsson 2019).

By the 1920s, Sweden was well on its way to a corporatist organization of agriculture: Rothstein (1992) portrays the milk policy under the Liberal government before the Depression as the “formative moment” of Swedish corporatism (cf. Hellström 1976, Ch. VI). In 1928, government agricultural policy was supporting organized farmer interests rather than laissez-faire capitalism. The Social Democratic-Farmers’ League policy after 1933 continued on this path. By 1938 the milk cooperatives controlled 91 per cent of the market,

and the butcher cooperatives 65 per cent of their market (Morell 2001, pp. 165-167); in 1980, 80 per cent of Swedish grain was produced by cooperative farms (Osterman 1982, p. 14).

Nevertheless, the political position of the farmers changed fundamentally as industry eroded the previously unthreatened position of agriculture as the nation's economic backbone, and as the labor movement and the reformist urban liberals undermined the hegemony of estate owners and pushed through democratic reforms, especially in 1909 but in 1918 also. The 'master of my domain' (*Herr im Haus*) presumption embodied in the Country Party in the 1880s and 1890s was no longer tenable in the 1910s and 1920s – especially when one considers the economic and social fragmentation of the farmer class, and the large social stratum which by the 1920s combined small-scale agriculture with some degree of wage labor, perhaps seasonal work in forestry (Persson 1991; Rydén 1998, ch. 3). It is significant that by the 1940s, corporatist agricultural policy was being formulated with the aim of guaranteeing smaller farmers – the majority of farmers – an economic standard comparable to that of an average male industrial worker (Nanneson 1946). The farmers were no longer the norm.

In this regard, it is not surprising to see the formation in 1929 of the first 'trade union' for farmers, explicitly influenced by the Socialist trade unions for workers: Riksförbundet Landsbygdens Folk (RLF). The key aim at the outset was to collaborate as a producer cartel in local markets and set common prices for produce; typically for farmers' organizations, the profits of middlemen and traders were among its main targets (e.g. Berger 1972; Sanders 1999, pp. 179-184). The initiative came from the relatively poor and egalitarian north, and was an explicit attempt to organize small farmers, as distinct from the older, elite-dominated organizations (Rydén 1998, pp. 120ff). The background of the RLF's founder and first chairman, Viktor Johansson, is no coincidence. Johansson was a family farmer in the northern county of Västerbotten and was a very active politician locally, for the more left-oriented of the two liberal parties (*Frisinnade partiet*). He was also a driving force in the local dairy cooperative (Thullberg 1977, p. 7).

The difference from the initiatives of the 1890s and 1910s is striking. The Agrarförbund of the 1890s was an initiative by estate owners from the grain-producing plains in the south of the country, and the Farmers' March of 1914 was an initiative by estate owners, merchants and capitalists from the wealthy areas around Stockholm. But the RLF initiative came from the relatively poor and marginal north, and its founder, just like the

Farmers' League leader Bramstorp, had a background in liberal party politics.¹³ Thus, while common explanations of the democratic Swedish trajectory have stressed the continuities in farmer politics (Castles 1973; Tilton 1974; Esping-Andersen 1985), its discontinuities were in fact sharp. Not organized by magnates from above, as the Country Party was, the self-organizing and democratic farmer of the 1920s and 1930s should rather be seen as deriving from the underestimated strength of Swedish Liberalism, Lib-Labism and Liberal party politics of the 1900s and 1910s (cf. Hurd 2000) than as the product of a continued sequence of phases in agrarian politics.

7. Conclusions

The conventional wisdom is that the impetus to mold Swedish society in the twentieth century into something democratic and egalitarian came from a relatively egalitarian and powerful farmer class (Castles 1973; Tilton 1974; Alestalo and Kuhnle 1987; Sørensen and Stråth 1997; Bendixsen, Bringslid, and Vike 2018; Stråth 2018). The specificity in the process of democratization and creation at the end of a Social Democratic regime has been traced back to independent organizing (Rueschemeyer et al. 1992) and to an alliance of the “farmers’ party” with the Social Democrats (Esping-Andersen 1985; Luebbert 1991, Ch. 8).

The argument of this essay is that this conventional wisdom is misleading. Sweden in the decades around 1900 was a much more undemocratic and anti-egalitarian society than is widely assumed (cf. Bengtsson 2019), and farmer politicians in alliance with estate owners in the Country Party did very little to alleviate any of this inequality. The discontinuities of Swedish politics and economics in the first decades of the twentieth century are much more severe than has typically been appreciated. The tumultuous and difficult road to democracy defies the teleological narratives of a Swedish *Sonderweg* (Trägårdh 1997; Bendixsen, Bringslid, and Vike 2018; Stråth 2018).

The argument of Rueschemeyer, Huber Stephens and Stephens (1992) that large-scale agriculturalists, e.g. estate owners, are anti-democratic in their preferences due to their dependence on cheap labor resonates very well with the Swedish experience. However, the behavior of the Swedish farmers confounds expectations. The “farmer” MPs of the late 1800s,

¹³ Similar links can be found as far back as the 1800s. Ola Jönsson i Kungshult, one of the few farmers in the leadership of the radical New Liberal Party of the 1860s, was strengthened in his radical convictions by reading a radical newspaper from the city of Helsingborg, not far from his home. See the biography of Jönsson in SBL, Petersson (1973-1975).

who were quite wealthy capitalists (Bengtsson and Olsson 2018), had no problem in uniting first with estate owners in the Country Party and, after 1904, with those in the Conservative Party. Although even newer works tend to interpret the conservatism of the Riksdag farmers at the turn of the century as continuous, with historical agrarian skepticism towards experimentation and innovation (Stråth 2005, p. 525), their conservatism should rather be seen as modern, capitalist Conservatism with a capital C.

However, with the growth of Liberal and Socialist politics around 1900 and popular movements – teetotalism, free churches, and the labor movement – a counter-tendency also emerged. To go back to Rueschemeyer et al.’s analysis (1992, p. 50), “it is the growth of a counter-hegemony of subordinate classes and especially the working class – developed and sustained by the organization and growth of trade unions, working-class parties and similar groups – that is critical for the promotion of democracy.” Precisely this type of counter-hegemony developed in popular politics around 1900, in opposition to the very stale and exclusive official politics (cf. Hurd 2000). This affected the farmers too. With folk high schools, cooperatives, farmers’ unions and in the end the Farmers’ League, the farmers did eventually organize themselves, escaping the leadership of estate owners, under such leaders as Bramstorp and Viktor Johansson who had been schooled in Liberal party politics. It is conventional to see twentieth-century Social Democracy as an epiphenomenon of an alleged egalitarian precedent in farmer society (Trägårdh 1997; Bendixsen et al. 2018). The analysis here shows the opposite: it was the strength of popular movements – Liberalism, Social Democracy and Lib-Labism – in Swedish civil society that shaped a democratic farmer class.

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