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A labour market regime without repression?

Erik Bengtsson✱

Introduction: a peaceful labour market?

From discussion on anti-labour violence and the general repression of trade unionism and strikes pre-World War I, Sweden would appear – at least from the domestic literature – to be an exceptional case. We know that peaceful industrial relations developed in the 1930s, symbolised by the famous Saltsjöbaden Agreement between unions and employers in 1938. But several scholars assert that even in the final third of the nineteenth century, there was very little repression of unionism and strikes in this country.¹ Against the view that a cooperative Swedish model emerged under Social Democratic auspices in the 1930s, the revisionists see the “bourgeois roots of the Swedish model”.²

This essay interrogates this narrative of Swedish exceptionalism in the context of the labour market. I have indicated elsewhere that analyses of Swedish exceptionalism in terms of early democratisation and social egalitarianism tend to be overestimated.³ This chapter starts with two research questions: was the Swedish labour market regime c. 1870–1914 uniquely liberal and labour-friendly and, if so, which social forces were behind this exceptionalism – the strength of farmers, the liberalism of the bourgeoisie or something else? The chapter does not in the main build on original archival research, but rather on a synthesis of the existing literature, combined with analysis of parliamentary materials. As parliament, the *Riksdag*, was the decision maker on labour market regulation, the essay focuses mainly on parliamentary politics. To trace social inputs on policy, extra-parliamentary forces and movements will also be discussed. The relations between workers, unions and employers, and important phenomena such as strikebreaking will also be discussed.

The conventional view and its contradictions

The conventional view of a peaceful Swedish labour market goes back to the political scientist Jörgen Westerståhl’s classic 1945 study of the development of the Swedish trade union movement.⁴ His analysis begins with the 1846 and 1864 liberal reforms of enterprises. Previously, the state had regulated access to professions and the setting of wages. It fined those who increased the wages of

journeymen and workers, doubling the fine if the demand for higher wages had been made collectively. Collective action was seen as a form of rebellion and punished under criminal law.⁵ The 1864 law abolished the requirement of guild membership and stated allegiance to “free work” (*arbetets frihet*), but still stipulated, in patriarchal spirit, that employers were the masters (*husbonde*) and should inculcate the fear of god, orderliness and sobriety in their employees. The Master and Servant Law (*Tjänstehjonsstadgan*) prevailed, together with the law of obligatory service, which allowed any landless person without lawful employment to be sentenced to forced labour.

Westerståhl argued that the 1864 reform ushered in a liberal labour market regime; apart from the “unclear” law of obligatory service, workers had “achieved a judicially completely independent standing”.⁶ This, he argues, was remarkable: “most other” countries implemented laws against unions and collective action. The Swedish union movement that emerged in the 1880s, Westerståhl maintained, had no specific legal barriers to surmount, and interventions by authorities were “comparatively rare”.⁷ Without explaining Sweden’s uniquely liberal regime, he dated its advent to 1864, generally among Swedish political historians considered a liberal watershed.⁸

The journalist and political scientist Svante Nycander follows Westerståhl in arguing, in a 2008 general history of the Swedish labour market, that, after the 1864 reform, Swedish labour was organised in a climate of relative freedom, while in other countries, unions and strikes suffered direct oppression.⁹ The Master and Servant Law, Nycander says, persisted in Britain, without mentioning that Sweden retained it until 1926. Generally, Sweden’s treatment of unions was relatively lenient; Nycander dismisses accounts of oppressed labour activists in Sweden¹⁰ as narratives of “martyrs”, replacing them with a description of “collective laissez faire” from the government’s side, which allowed and encouraged organisation of workers and employers. This, argues Nycander, provides the historical roots of the famous Saltsjöbaden Agreement of 1938.¹¹

For Nycander, himself a politically organised liberal and longtime leader writer for the liberal daily *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden owed its non-interventionist model fundamentally to the strength of social liberalism. “The main political conflict line wasn’t between bourgeoisie and the labour movement, but between the left and the right”, the left at this time being the Social Democrats as well as the Liberals, who won roughly 30 per cent in elections until around 1930. “Liberals prevented anti-union laws and made the decisive difference in moulding opinion for the right to organize”.¹²

Another theory attributes Swedish labour market exceptionalism not to liberal reforms of the 1840s or 1860s, or to left-wing liberals, but to the farmers. Some contend that farmers had exceptional influence in Swedish politics, standing for a proto-Social Democratic line. In this vein Mary Hilson argues that it was the farmer-dominated second chamber that led Sweden to be relatively benign towards labour.¹³ This version of the peaceful labour market thesis has not been very much developed but refers to a wider discussion of Swedish exceptionalism

where farmers are assumed to carry a democratic and egalitarian tradition from the early modern period and into industrial society.¹⁴

Why question the conventional view?

Advocates of Swedish (or Scandinavian) exceptionalism educe several, presumably related societal traits: economic equality, equal political influences and peaceful relations between the classes. As one recent contribution to the genre comments: “Scandinavia is unique in Western Europe in that there has been no real class war”.¹⁵ However, both in terms of economic inequality and political democracy, the exceptionalism narratives exaggerate. In the 1890s, Sweden was one of the least democratic countries in Western Europe, in terms of suffrage laws, and one of the most unequal in terms of the distribution of incomes and wealth.¹⁶

From this point of view, it is interesting to revisit the idea that Sweden had unusually peaceful relations between the classes and less oppression of the labour movement. While a more conflict-oriented, and often Marxist-inflected history writing dominated in the 1970s and 1980s when the field of labour history experienced an upswing, today the history writing of the early industrial Swedish labour market is dominated by the consensus perspective. This is indicated by the fact that both textbooks on Swedish labour market history, Nycander’s *Makten över arbetsmarknaden* and Lundh’s *Spelets regler*, propose this perspective.¹⁷

The state, workers and the labour movement, c. 1870–1910

In studying the Swedish labour market in this period, we should first consider agricultural workers and servants, the major groups left out of the conventional accounts of developing industrial relations. In 1870, 72 per cent of workers were in agriculture; in 1910, 51 per cent.¹⁸ The importance of the Master and Servant Law has been dismissed by saying that it was used mostly in sectors – agriculture – where unions did not operate,¹⁹ but this is of course the wrong way around: the presence of the law in itself contributed to the lack of unions. From 1896 on, Social Democrats and Liberals in parliament fought for a repeal but succeeded only in 1926, which indicates the persistence of patriarchalism in Swedish society.

A recent economic study argues that this enduring law increased the exploitation of agricultural workers and reduced their chance to escape to other work.²⁰ Like servant-girls, who proliferated between the wars, farm workers also long continued non-unionised. Attempts to organise were stifled by the employers in the early 1890s, then in 1904–05, with a liberal use of strikebreakers, and again in 1909; they did not become a part of the union movement mainstream until the 1930s.²¹

Violence

Sweden can claim a relative lack of bloodshed in industrial relations in the period. The 1931 Ådalen shootings, when five unarmed demonstrators were killed by

the army protecting strikebreakers, are legendary in Swedish labour history, but largely for their uniqueness. Compared to for example the United States, there was less bloodshed in Swedish labour market relations.²²

The official political élite registered the arrival of a labour movement challenge in the 1870s. The use of the military to suppress a strike at a major iron mine (Persberg) in 1870 was taken in parliament to show the usefulness of a standing army, as opposed to a conscript force of soldiers who might be susceptible to radical agitation.²³ General Lars Tingsten, Minister of Defence in the early 1900s, recalls in his memoirs how as a young officer in 1879 his regiment was sent to Sundsvall to control the massive strike in its sawmills. In his account however, the army did nothing more militant than guarding strikebreakers and shepherding striking workers to speeches by the anti-union county governor, Curry Treffenberg.²⁴

Letters in 1892 between Christian Lundeberg, industry leader and later leader of the Conservative party, and Patric Reuterswärd, an iron-works owner, court marshal and leading Conservative in the first chamber, tell much about the comfort of the élite. At the 1892 parliament (*Riksdag*), Liberals as they always did, proposed a wider suffrage, which was once again opposed by a rock-solid right-wing majority in the first chamber and the second (more fluctuating) chamber. Lundeberg argued in his letter that the first chamber should make no fuss over the growing extra-parliamentary suffrage movement, and Reuterswärd agreed: they must “make a strong union, to sternly stick to the *status quo*. If the first chamber should tremble, then the country is lost, and if a rebellion comes, then the sooner the better, while our military is still untainted”.²⁵ The conservatives trusted the army to contain any outbreaks of labour militancy – as in Persberg in 1870 or the Sundsvall sawmills in 1879 – but there was never any immediate socialist threat.

This moderation cannot be explained by a relatively democratic state, because Sweden was not relatively democratic, nor by narrower class differences in incomes and wealth, because Sweden’s inequality could by 1900 rival that of any capitalist country.²⁶ Rather, I believe that the explanation must be sought in the field of political culture and repertoires of action in politics – Sweden’s élite was not more democratic or equal, but it was less violent. I return to this in the concluding section, after discussing the forms of repression that were used.

The lack of violence does not signify that the Swedish state apparatus was politically neutral versus the left and the right. In March 1920, two police detectives were in the audience for a lecture by the Social Democratic leader Hjalmar Branting, enthusiastically taking notes and waiting to hear something illegal.²⁷ Nothing unusual, perhaps, about such surveillance of a socialist event – except that Branting was the current prime minister! This indicates how far the socialists were from being legitimate bearers of power until the prolonged parliamentary struggles of the 1920s. Suspicion still lingered that this was an insurrectionary movement. But while the police watched everything the labour movement did, they relatively seldom intervened or stopped meetings. Eventually, the policemen became familiar to the activists, with whom reciprocal acceptance developed.²⁸ Thus relations between the state and the labour movement may not have been harmonious or friendly, but they rarely became violent.

Restrictions of free speech, from the 1880s to the 1900s

The Swedish Social Democratic Party was constituted in April 1889. King Oscar II immediately called Örbom, the minister of Justice – the government was then King’s advisers – to the castle and recommended that the 1887 law against agitation should be sharpened. This law, called the “little socialist law” with reference to the stronger anti-socialist laws in place in Germany, outlawed incitement to crimes (rebellion, treason etc.) and was directed against socialist and radical agitation. Explicitly, this law made it illegal to incite violence (very broadly understood) against a person or property. During the 1888 “prosecution frenzy” (*åtalsraseriet*) several Social Democratic agitators had been imprisoned under these rules. By 1889, all Social Democratic newspaper editors, including the informal party leader Branting, were in prison on account of anti-religious or otherwise inflammatory statements.²⁹

But in 1889 Örbom agreed with the king that the rules must be strengthened to prevent “violence and excess”, to protect workers against “ruthless agitators” and to protect society from the “spiritual disease” of socialism. The law seeks to prevent verbal incitement to actions “which amount to threats against the social order or danger for its duration”.³⁰ The Riksdag accepted Örbom’s proposed revision with some amendments. The law came to be used, among other things, in several instances against leaders of mobs who had fought the police: a riot in Stockholm during the 1902 general strike in favour of universal suffrage; strike-breakers in the west coast stone industry in 1904; and rioters against a prison in 1906. More simply political cases all concerned Social Democrats: when leading party agitator and journalist Axel Danielsson on 1 May 1891 apparently encouraged the use of violence against the police, when party leader Branting on 1 May 1895 discussed the secession of Norway from the Norwegian-Swedish union and how drafted militaries should use their weapons (not against the Norwegians), and when two anarchist-leaning agitators in 1906 got 10 and three months in prison respectively for encouraging resistance to conscription.³¹ The 1889 law quickly became known as the “muzzle law”.

What were the social forces behind the 1887 and 1889 laws? The king was clearly one of the actors behind the 1889 law, acting from his conviction that socialism was a threat to the existing social order. Minister of Justice Axel Örbom was a lawyer and a bureaucrat of conservative bent, serving in a government, led by Baron Gillis Bildt, considered at the time to be moderately conservative. Of the ten ministers, four were noble, and Baron Bildt, a court marshal and personal friend of the king, was an estate owner. When the farmer leader Liss Olof Larsson was discussed as potential government minister, to appoint a farmer as minister was considered too brave. Bildt was court marshal and friends with the king. In sum, the government was as *ancien regime* as it gets.³²

The 1889 “muzzle law” was voted through by a 83–25 majority in the first chamber, and 109–102 in the second.³³ Albert Lilienberg, a lawyer and member of the free-trading Centre Party, thought that the proposal was too vague, giving judges too much discretion, and with reference to the 1887 law, not necessary. In

the first chamber, the criticism levelled at the reform was also that it was inefficient and/or unnecessary. There were a few more principled criticisms as well. Hans Andersson, a farmer on the liberal wing of the Country Party, fought against the law on principled grounds, arguing that it would limit the right to assembly and could lead to political trials where people would be sentenced just for arguing for reforms. One of the most prominent Liberals of the Riksdag, S.A. Hedlund, spoke of the reform as a “politics of oppression”. The prominent Free Church leader Waldenström warned that this anti-socialist law might in the future be used against dissenting churches.

In the case of the 1887 law, the initiative came from the Minister of Justice von Steyern. Three farmers and one schoolteacher spoke out against the decision. Around 60 second chamber MPs voted against the law; in the first chamber, only one.

On the whole then, we might say that with a weaker first chamber and weaker royal power, repressive laws such as the “little socialist law” and the “muzzle law” would have been harder difficult to pass. The evidence here does not support the idea of liberal influence guaranteeing civil rights from the farmers. In both 1887 and 1889 farmers were quite evenly split, with more liberal free traders rejecting the repressive measures, and more conservative protectionists approving. The Liberal intelligentsia played a role through representatives including S.A. Hedin who was the most fierce and feared opponent of the conservative governments of the late 1880s and early 1890s. The king and the government were afraid of Hedin’s oratory and mobilising powers, and this may to some extent have restrained their conservatism: to tack too far to the right could have sparked a revolt led by agitators such as Hedin.³⁴

The restrictions of free speech continued into the twentieth century. In 1906, the liberal government of Karl Staaff outlawed anti-military propaganda. That the reformist liberal Staaff put through this reform has caused consternation among historians; it may have been a (failed) attempt to endear himself to the conservatives and make them more amenable to suffrage reform.³⁵ However, Staaff himself in the intemperate second chamber debate claimed that the socialists had worsened since 1889 by spawning the monster of militant anarchism. The Staaff Laws were especially directed against anti-militarist propaganda but were also used in labour market conflicts, which makes them interesting here. For example, in 1908 Carl Lind was sentenced to two months’ imprisonment for encouraging a general strike, direct action and economic destruction. Hjalmar Gustafsson was sentenced to two months’ penal labour for having encouraged railroad workers to join the strike at a strike meeting of 15,000 people in Stockholm in August 1909; this was illegal since they were state employees. The chairman of the miners’ union in Norberg served 11 months’ penal labour for a strike meeting in August 1909 where he referred to strikebreakers as traitors and encouraged a riot to free striking workers from the local jail. To sum up the Staaff Laws were indeed used to hamper strikes.³⁶

What then were the social forces behind the law? As referred to earlier, they may have been political tactics to appease the conservatives. When the proposal

was presented to the Riksdag's Law Committee, three members spoke against it altogether or in parts. The liberal Theodor Zetterstrand wanted to remove "praise of criminal acts" as a punishable action, while two Social Democrats opposed the entire law. The first chamber accepted it without debate, whereas the second chamber debate was intense, ending with approval by 164 votes to 51 for its main proposals.³⁷ There were only 13 Social Democratic MPs at the time, so quite a few liberals must have defected from Staaff's line and voted against.

Defending strikebreaking

After the union movement's breakthrough in the 1880s, it became more and more obvious to the ruling élite that unions and strikes were a significant factor in the Swedish labour market. In 1894 the new labour conflict statistics included 44 strikes and in the three years that followed the numbers grew to 65, 109 and 144.³⁸ At the 1892 Riksdag, J. Eliasson, a farmer, proposed a law to prevent obstacles to strikebreaking. Eliasson urged the measure by describing several "threatening phenomena, which threaten the social calm". He wanted a new law against anyone who with "cunning, temptations, threats or force" hindered anyone from working, and he argued that prosecutors must be able to prosecute such crimes without any initiative from the victims themselves. The strikebreakers, Eliasson argued, were too afraid of vengeance and therefore would not themselves attempt counter-prosecution. "It cannot be denied that several work cancellations look like and degenerate into rebellion. One has often seen that military or increased police presence has been necessary to conserve social peace".³⁹

The legal technicalities of Eliasson's proposal complicated the Riksdag debate and it was once re-referred to the parliamentary Law Committee, but thereafter the motion was passed by 99 votes to 65 in the second chamber, and with little debate in the first. The only people who vigorously opposed it on principle were the urban radical liberals. S.A. Hedin, in a long tirade cited horror stories of employers' maltreatment of their workers and accused Eliasson of a biased view of justice in the labour market: no punishment for employers who dismissed workers for joining a union, yet punishment for workers who organised. Interestingly, Hedin in a way defended the farmer hypothesis of Swedish liberalism, arguing that Eliasson belonged to "a class, a stratum of society, which for centuries has been oppressed by the nobility and royal bureaucracy", and that Eliasson should see its similarity to the working class of the 1890s. Julius Mankell⁴⁰ reinforced Hedin's rejection by referring to the story of a worker who was imprisoned for eight months for having touched a strikebreaker's arm. A farmer Jonsson argued that the proposal was one-sided, limiting the union's actions but not the employer's, and that it could awaken a sleeping bear, i.e. provoke the labour movement to greater activity. But most MPs supported the proposal, and it was passed in its revised version.

Defending strikebreakers was a recurrent aim in Swedish parliamentary politics at this time. In 1897 and 1898, the conservative estate owner C.J. Jakobson of

the (protectionist, conservative) New Country Party proposed that strikers should be sentenced to forced labour.⁴¹ He warned of the “strike disease” and of “modern tyrants called trade union leaders”. Thirty MPs from the same party joined in, showing again the farmers’ conservative voice. Against the proposal, the liberal farmer Daniel Persson believed that the road to harmony between employers and workers would not go through the prison. Liberals and conservative farmers split over this issue, while city representatives were much more negative.⁴² After the Law Committee’s revisions, the first chamber passed the proposal, but the second rejected it.

In 1899, Jakobson’s proposal was taken up by a Country party colleague, and this time the second chamber passed it by 118 votes to 93. This U-turn since the 1898 parliament related to growing intensity of the labour market issue. In 1898, the first Swedish trade union confederation LO (Landsorganisationen) constituted itself with the aim to organise workers in all sectors. And during the year, there was a wave of strikes, including some major ones, in the southernmost Malmöhus County, which was well represented in the second chamber. Relations between (political) farmers and workers were deteriorating.

In 1899, the farmer Pehr Persson from Åkarp, a village in southern Sweden, proposed criminalising not only successful but also failed attempts to incite strikes. The first chamber passed it without debate, but the second chamber gave it a narrow majority – 108 to 93. Conservative and moderately conservative farmers were the keenest to back it⁴³ and only one city dweller, a moderately liberal lieutenant expressed support. Some urban right-wing notables opposed it: the Free Church leader Waldenström and von Krusenstjerna – and the radicals naturally dismissed it as expressing “egoistic class interest” on Persson’s part. All its opponents in the second chamber, bar the jurist Husberg, whose opposition was technical-legal, were liberals or radicals.⁴⁴

This pattern further undermines the farmer hypothesis of Swedish exceptionalism and supports the bourgeois intelligentsia hypothesis. The élites of the first chamber – estate owners, capitalists and the like – favoured labour repression, farmers were rather evenly split (but increasingly Conservative over the 1890s) and urban liberals fought it.⁴⁵

The evolution of employer attitudes and the use of strikebreakers

This chapter mainly concerns the stance of the state vis-à-vis the unions, but to understand the state’s action, it is worth looking at the employers, who also carried much political weight. In the final third of the nineteenth century, employer attitudes were marked by patriarchalism. John Bernström, CEO of the important engineering company Separator in Stockholm, is typical. He was a Christian patriarch whose lifelong worldview was coloured by the Lutheran *Haustafel*. Even in 1904 he advocated that the employers should aim to defend the “rights of the master of the house in the country’s industry” (*häfda husbonderätten inom landets industri*).⁴⁶

Swedish labour history on the late 1800s is replete with depictions of anti-union activity. The iron processing companies of rural central Sweden, so dominant in their localities, shut organisers out by evicting them from company land (which was most land around the works where the workers were), or, when the organisers and agitators had found public ground to use, by measures such as commending the employees' brass band to play loudly to drown out the agitation, or commending agricultural workers on the company land to beat their milk jugs with clappers for the same purpose. As one dissertation found, most of the ironworks investigated fired the workers who joined the first union.⁴⁷

The Separator company responded to the 1902 three-day strike in favour of universal suffrage with a lockout and by firing all the striking workers, whom they refused to reinstate unless they left the trade union.⁴⁸ The CEO Bernström would refuse to hire any organised worker and would dismiss anyone who joined a union. In practice the freedom to organise was rather limited. Bernström gradually started to accept unions after 1903, after a protracted war of attrition between unions and employers in the engineering industry, but always believed that socialist influence in the union movement should be crushed.

At the first labour conflict of the Cementaktiebolaget of southern Sweden, in 1886, the company dismissed about 40 strikers. R.F. Berg, its CEO at the end of the 1890s still spoke of Social Democracy as "hating christianity and often threatening with illegal actions and violence".⁴⁹ From 1902 on, Berg was in contact with the bourgeois reformists of the CSA – the Swedish equivalent of the Fabians or the *Kathedersozialisten* – and his anti-union attitudes mellowed; by 1906 he had embraced collective agreements. In 1908, advising on the ongoing conflict in the harbour of Norrköping, he said: "the use of strike-breakers is a very dangerous method, which we here in Scania no longer dare to use". Liberal ideas, acquired in discussions with prominent reformist intellectuals, and his Free Church experience of consorting with lower-class people were surely important to Berg's reformism after 1906, but the impression remains that it was also simply his adjustment to the attrition battle of strikes and lockouts in the 1899–1906 period.

The right of workers to organise was indeed issue of a protracted struggle between workers and employers. In the 1906 "December Compromise" between SAF, the employers' confederation, and LO, the union confederation, union organising was accepted in principle. In exchange, SAF got a guarantee from LO for the exclusive say in hiring and firing. The issue of strikebreaking was left unresolved. However, with this compromise, the employers turned away from rejecting collective agreements and used them in their own favour, to control competition over labour,⁵⁰ thus helping to usher in a new era of Swedish industrial relations. But the road to 1906 had been rocky, and conflicts continued.

The use of strikebreaking paralleled more generally the evolving employer attitudes. Before the 1890s it was easy for employers to punish strikers and win conflicts by combined strikebreaking and dismissal. Afterwards, with developing organisation in Social Democratic unions, it was harder to find spontaneous strikebreakers. At first employers resorted to importing strikebreakers – from

England, in the case of harbours – but after a violent conflict in 1908, they ceased. Next they either recruited for this purpose strikebreakers from organisations, or from other social classes, notably, military officers.⁵¹ Some tried to form a Yellow union movement, in the shape of the Swedish Workers' Union (*Svenska Arbetareförbundet*); however, this never became very important, though it furnished strikebreakers in 1905–07.⁵² In the first decade of the twentieth century, strikebreakers were still used in 20–30 per cent of all strikes, and the use flared up again in the militant interwar era during the years 1925–36, but declined after that.

The study of German employers by Paster offers a comparative perspective on employer attitudes.⁵³ In Paster's account, German employers after the 1890s sporadically moved from a conservative, completely anti-union "master in my house" position to a reluctant acceptance of unionism under the revolutionary threat of the First World War. The "master in my house" metaphor is of course precisely what Bernström and other Swedish employers used (*Sw. husbonde*). After 1900 some employers – fewer in heavy industry, more in industries with stronger unions – chose to negotiate rather than trying to crush the unions, Paster says. The timing is then not completely different from Sweden's. While proponents of Swedish exceptionalism imply that no employers in other countries accepted unions, this seems to overstate the degree of opposition elsewhere and the uniqueness of the Swedish experience.⁵⁴

Why strikebreaking didn't take a stronger hold in Sweden is an interesting in a comparative European context,⁵⁵ but is difficult to answer based on the research which currently exists. That it became difficult for employers to recruit strikebreakers from the ranks of the workers themselves can be explained by the rather exceptional spread of Social Democratic class consciousness from the 1910s on – Swedish workers were to an internationally exceptional degree organised in trade unions, the Social Democratic party, and various other social and political organisations of a Social Democratic bent, such as workers' libraries, study groups and social organisations.⁵⁶ But the decline of imported and middle-class strikebreakers is less well explained, and indeed an important topic for further research.

The general strike of 1909 should be brought up here. The employers' successful use of strikebreakers in 1909 became well-known all across Europe, as is highlighted by Pierre Eichenberger's chapter in this book. But it must be said that the strike itself, while massive in its extension and very important in the short run as it depleted the unions' strike funds and caused a massive exodus of members, in the long run was less important than we would perhaps expect of a general strike. The fundamental factors leading to the conflict were, as Schiller showed in his brilliant dissertation,⁵⁷ trivial and very mundane for the time – unions' opposition to employers' demands for wage-cutting in a recession. The binding together, during the years 1907–09, of such conflicts from various sectors, led to a breaking point. Schiller shows that after the three-day general strike for universal suffrage in 1902, the issue of a general strike had been debated several times within the LO. The reason why a general strike was decided in 1909 was rather an issue of the transformation of quantity into quality – the long-standing, simmering conflicts over wage-cutting finally boiling over – rather than the result of something unique

and interesting occurring in 1909. The LO leadership were tired of the recurrent demands for lowering wages and worried about how the internal left opposition could exploit rank and file dissent if the LO stood for a conciliatory policy vis-à-vis the employers too many times. The resulting win for the employers was not surprising, but not very long-lasting either: after a very drastic drop in trade union affiliation as workers could not afford the union dues or became disgruntled, the unions started growing very rapidly again, and actually grew stronger than ever before, as their political allies in the Social Democratic party grew into a party of government and as the revolutionary threat during World War I strengthened the workers' hand at the bargaining table.⁵⁸

The growth of liberal reformism within the state apparatus

We may wonder how the liberal reformist intelligentsia responded to increasing labour unrest. Research has shown that placing social liberals in the state apparatus could indeed decisively ameliorate class conflict.⁵⁹

In Sweden, Ernst Beckman, a leading left liberal, proposed in 1892 and 1893 in the second chamber that the state must collect official statistics on labour conflicts. Science was needed to solve the “worker question”, Beckman maintained.⁶⁰ After Beckman's proposals fell, the liberal suffrage movement leader David Bergström proposed the same in 1895.⁶¹ Interestingly, Beckman's proposal fell in the second chamber owing to fierce opposition from the leader of the New Country Party, A.P. Danielsson. Danielsson, who was the wealthiest farmer in the second chamber and involved in various companies outside of the farm sector, was staunchly conservative. This divide between urban bourgeois liberals of the social liberal type and wealthy, conservative farmers is telling.

Liberals did reach influence at the Swedish National Board of Trade (*Kommerskollegium*) where around 1903, a group of liberal-minded social reformists gathered in the labour market section, led by Henning Elmquist.⁶² In this regard, as well as in employer organisations, Swedish labour market relations took a conciliatory turn around 1905.

At this time, despite the Staaff Laws, some evidence shows increased support for a more conciliatory industrial relations model among the liberal policy intelligentsia and large employers. In 1906 this tendency became policy when the Liberal government led by Karl Staaff proposed the creation of a state mediation institute to get to grips with labour market conflicts. The very serious strikes and lockouts in the previous years, especially in the engineering industry, make a substantial background to this proposal. A recent study finds that mediation, which started in 1907, had a significant effect on the outcomes of conflict, increasing the share of compromises,⁶³ but the important underlying question is how the mediators came to exist in the first place.

Here we can trace the influence of the liberal urban intelligentsia. During the formative period 1904–06, proposals were also going in a very different direction. Conservative MPs in 1904 and 1905, inspired by the Taff Vale case in Britain, wrote several proposals to parliament that unions should be financially

responsible for any costs to employers from strikes.⁶⁴ However, in 1905, when suffrage had been extended by wage growth and inflation that pushed workers and lower-middle-class people over the income limit for the right to vote, the Liberals and the Social Democrats won a majority in the second chamber. The Liberals in 1906 could secure what Beckman and Bergström had proposed in 1892–95. The conservatives and representatives of industry in parliament though opposing state mediation, could not prevent it.

Conclusion

This paper started from two research questions. One, was the Swedish labour market regime c. 1870–1914 uniquely liberal and labour-friendly? Two, if so, which were the social forces behind this exceptionalism – the strength of farmers, the liberalism of the bourgeoisie, or something else?

The first has no easy answer. Swedish labour relations were certainly less violent in this period than in the US, France or Spain. However, it is not obvious that British labour relations were as oppressive as proponents of Swedish exceptionalism have argued. The reforms in the 1870s which ended complete repression of unions under criminal law accords rather well with the 1864 reform in Sweden.⁶⁵ While British unions were not completely immune from civil prosecution until 1906, Acts of 1871 and 1875 limited the practical impact on unions, and “fear of the courts had little effect on union organisation or industrial conflict during the 1890s”.⁶⁶ The difference between Britain and Sweden is possibly not as great as might be supposed. Indeed, the phrase “collective laissez-faire” which proponents of Swedish exceptionalism use to describe the Swedish system, was invented by Otto Kahn-Freund to describe the British industrial relations system.

While bloodshed was not the rule, however, the Swedish regime was not particularly labour-friendly or union friendly. Restrictions on agricultural labourers and servants, together with the pauperism regulations, served to discipline much of the labour force. That unions were not outlawed is true, but the freedom of speech restrictions represented by the 1887 “little socialist law”, 1889 “muzzle law” and 1906 Staaff Laws did restrain unions’ freedom of action, as did the anti-strike measures of 1892 and 1899. It seems that employers in the tumultuous years around 1902–09 gradually thawed towards the existence of trade unions, even socialist ones. The 1907 mediation law seems to have been successful; labour market conflict declined somewhat in frequency and also shifted qualitatively, as fundamental issues of the right to organise became less common as ground for conflict, and a larger share of conflicts were about more pragmatic issues of wages and working conditions. Thus, while labour market conflict intensified in the 1920s, the conflicts were by then more within the existing system, than about (re-)shaping the industrial relations system wholesale.

On question two, it seems clear that the political representation of farmers was no guarantee of workers’ civil rights. By the late nineteenth century, under the very restrictive income and wealth qualifications for the right to vote, farmer MPs were always wealthy farmers elected by other wealthy farmers who, as employers,

had material interests in anti-union policies.⁶⁷ This erodes the old idea of farmers as liberal-democratic guarantors in Swedish politics or the driving force behind early social reforms.⁶⁸ I have found that urban liberals such as Hedin and Mankell were the most consistent proponents of workers' rights, but this in a sense is pleonastic, for I define this group not only by their urban residence and bourgeois class, but also by their ideology. Other bourgeois MPs had much less interest in workers' rights, and the capital-owners in the first chamber were on the other side of the debate; the élites of the first chamber at least until the mid-1890s acted as modernisers in economic policy, but without any interest in democratisation.⁶⁹ However, the influence of social liberal policy élites in Swedish labour market relations in this period is interesting for further research.

What seems to me unique, however, about the Swedish regulation of class relations c. 1870–1914 is not that there was any consensus around liberal rights – indeed, the class divide seems to have been much the same as in any other industrialising country. Class differences in wealth and incomes around 1900 were as wide in Sweden as in other industrial countries. However, the country's means for handling class conflict were different. The exclusion of the working class from politics was as absolute as in any other country and the ruling élite contained few or no modern liberals. But workers were repressed less violently than in many countries. The thesis of Swedish exceptionalism seems overblown and reached by overestimating the degree of labour repression in other European countries, ignoring agriculture and downplaying restrictions on free speech and union action. But there may still be something special about the relative bloodlessness of the Swedish case. Tentatively, I would like to hypothesise that this has very little to do with evidence of egalitarianism or democracy – Sweden offers little of either – but comes rather from its political culture, and more specifically from its repertoire of collective action from its own history. Tilly's concept of "repertoires of contention", modes of collective action which persist over time through some kind of path dependency, is typically used to analyse popular politics, but I believe that the concept may be useful for élite politics too.⁷⁰ As Tilly argues, "contention accumulated its own history of shared beliefs, memories, models, precedents, and social ties". This could be true also for Swedish élite political action: even though the economy was severely unequal, it could have involved a relatively light repertoire of repression. Repression, at least until the suffrage reforms of 1909 and 1919, was especially carried out through the exclusiveness of the political system.

Notes

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- 1 Jörgen Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse: Organisationsproblem, verksamhetsformer, förhållande till staten* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1945); Svante Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden: ett perspektiv på Sveriges 1900-tal* (Stockholm: SNS, 2008).
- 2 Labour movement-oriented: Walter Korpi, *The Democratic Class Struggle* (London: Routledge, 1983). Revisionists: Svante Nycander, "Svenska modellens borgerliga rötter," *Statsvetenskaplig Tidskrift* 120, no. 1 (2018): 5–31.
- 3 Erik Bengtsson, "The Swedish Sonderweg in Question: Democratization and Inequality in Comparative Perspective, c. 1750–1920," *Past & Present* 244, no. 1 (2019): 123–61.
- 4 Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*.
- 5 Susanne Fransson, "Freedom of Contract, Parity and Collective Regulation: Collective Labour Law in Sweden," in *The Rise and Development of Collective Labour Law*, ed. Marcel Van der Linden and Richard Price (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2000), 227–64.
- 6 Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, 12; cf. 235. On the regulations of the mid-nineteenth century see also Christer Lundh, *Spelets regler*, 2nd ed. (Stockholm: SNS, 2010), 50–61.
- 7 Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, 13.
- 8 For example Per T. Ohlsson, *Svensk politik* (Lund: Historiska media, 2014).
- 9 Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden*, 17–18, 82–99. The reference for other countries is Marcel van der Linden and Richard Price, eds., *The Rise and Development of Collective Labour Law* (Berlin: Lang, 2000). Nycander's study of the United States also colours his analysis; in comparison with the US, Sweden, like any other state, seems labour-friendly. The comparison with the US is Svante Nycander, *Kriget mot fackföreningarna: en studie av den amerikanska modellen* (Stockholm: SNS, 1998). Robin Archer's comparison of labour movements and repression against them in the United States and Australia highlights how extreme the US case is. As Hilson points out, our choice of comparison countries will inevitably colour our analysis of our first country. Robin Archer, *Why Is There No Labor Party in the United States?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008). Mary Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden 1890–1920* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2000), 18–22.
- 10 Per Eklund, *Rätten i klasskampen* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1974); Fransson, "Freedom of Contract."
- 11 Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden*, 87–91. The image of non-interventionism on behalf of the state is given also in international research such as Jackson and Sisson, who use this fact to explain why employers in Sweden created a central organisation so early (1902). Peter Jackson and Keith Sisson, "Employers' Confederations in Sweden and the U.K. and the Significance of Industrial Infrastructure," *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 14, no. 3 (1976): 306–23. Marxists such as Therborn et al. also accept Westerståhl's description of a liberal, lenient state after 1864. Göran Therborn, Anders Kjellberg, Staffan Marklund, and Ulf Öhlund, "Sverige före och efter socialdemokratien: en första översikt," *Arkiv för studier i arbetarrörelsens historia* (1979): 1–39. See page 8.
- 12 Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden*, 96, 99; Nycander, "Svenska modellens borgerliga rötter."
- 13 Hilson, *Political Change*, 43–44. One can question this view from the outset simply because the farmers were themselves employers, and so not necessarily interested in a liberal environment for unions and labour activism. Of course, this depends on their economic status: family farmers without hired labour might not be perturbed by trade unionism.
- 14 E.g. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, "Introduction," in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, ed. Sørensen and Stråth (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 1–24. See Bengtsson, "The Swedish Sonderweg," for discussion.

- 15 Synnøve Bendixsen, Mary Bente Bringslid, and Halvard Vike, "Introduction: Egalitarianism in a Scandinavian Context," in *Egalitarianism in Scandinavia: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Bendixsen, Bringslid and Vike (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 15.
- 16 See Bengtsson, "The Swedish Sonderweg," 124–26, 135–38.
- 17 Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden*; Lundh, *Spelets regler*. However Lundh has a more critical perspective, see 65–78. But he also says that "The state at the time of the union movement's emergence followed a non-intervention line" (114). For discussion see also Erik Bengtsson and Tobias Karlsson, "What We Know and What We Don't Know about Swedish Labor Market History: Reflections on Spelets Regler," *Essays in Economic & Business History XXXV* (1): 14–35.
- 18 Rodney Edvinsson, *Growth, Accumulation, Crisis: With New Macroeconomic Data for Sweden 1800–2000* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 2005), data sheet, Table O.
- 19 Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*.
- 20 Björn Tyrefors Hinnerich, Erik Lindgren, and Per Pettersson-Lidbom, "The Political Economics of Growth, Labor Control and Coercion: Evidence from a Suffrage Reform" (Unpublished paper, Stockholms universitet, Stockholm, 2019).
- 21 On farm workers, Pär-Erik Back, *En klass i uppbrott: Den fackliga lantarbetarrörelsens uppkomst och utveckling* (Malmö: Framtidens bokförlag, 1961), 25, 54. On maidservants, Kerstin Moberg, *Från tjänstehjon till hembiträde: En kvinnlig låglönegrupp i den fackliga kampen 1903–1946* (Stockholm: Almqvist och Wiksell, 1978).
- 22 Cf. Matteo Millan, "Introduction: Strikebreaking During Europe's Belle Époque," *European History Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2019): 553–69.
- 23 Per Hultqvist, *Försvar och skatter: Studier i svensk riksdagspolitik från representationsreformen till kompromissen 1873* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1955), 196–201.
- 24 Lars Tingsten, *Hågkomster* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 1938), 42–46.
- 25 Torbjörn Vallinder, *I kamp för demokratin. Rösträttsrörelsen i Sverige 1866–1902* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1962), 111.
- 26 Jesper Roine and Daniel Waldenström, "The Evolution of Top Incomes in an Egalitarian Society: Sweden, 1903–2004," *Journal of Public Economics* 92, no. 1–2 (2008): 366–87; Erik Bengtsson, Anna Missiaia, Mats Olsson, and Patrick Svensson, "Wealth Inequality in Sweden, 1750–1900," *The Economic History Review* 71, no. 3 (2018): 772–94.
- 27 Katarina Alexius, *Politisk yttrandefrihet: En studie i lagstiftning och praxis under demokratins genombrottsstid* (Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus, 1997), 332.
- 28 Jenny Langkjaer, *Övervakning för rikets säkerhet: Svensk säkerhetspolisier övervakning av utländska personer och inhemsk politisk aktivitet, 1885–1922* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 2011).
- 29 On 1889 and Örbom see Per Sundberg, *Ministärerna Bildt och Åkerhielm: En studie i den svenska parlamentarismens förgårdar* (Stockholm: Stockholms högskola, 1961), 155–56. On the 1887 law see Alexius, *Politisk yttrandefrihet*, 67–73. On the editors in prison, see Olle Svenning, *Hövdingen: Hjalmar Branting, en biografi* (Stockholm: Bonniers, 2014), 114.
- 30 Royal Proposition 1889 No 44. <https://weburn.kb.se/riks/metadata/89/19566389.html>. All parliamentary papers 1867–1970 are digitalised and available at the Royal Library's website: <https://riksdagstryck.kb.se/tvakammarriksdagen.html>. The quote from the final law text comes from Sundberg, *Ministärerna Bildt och Åkerhielm*, 157.
- 31 The cases are discussed in Alexius, *Politisk yttrandefrihet*, 82–94.
- 32 On élite politics at this time in Sweden, constitutionally conservative but economically liberal, see Torbjörn Nilsson, *Elitens svängrum: Första kammaren, staten och moderniseringen 1867–1886* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1994).
- 33 On this law and the politics around it, see Alexius, *Politisk yttrandefrihet*, 74–83; Sundberg *Ministärerna Bildt och Åkerhielm*, 159–62.

- 34 Sundberg, *Ministärerna Bildt och Åkerhielm*, 301–3, 343–45.
- 35 Hans Lindblad, *Karl Staaff: Försvaret och demokratin* (Stockholm: Ekerlids förlag, 2015). On Staaff on anarchism, see Eklund, *Rätten i klasskampen*, 122–28.
- 36 Alexius, *Politisk yttrandefrihet*, 116–54.
- 37 Eklund, *Rätten i klasskampen*, 122–25; Alexius, *Politisk yttrandefrihet*, 94–110.
- 38 Sten Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen: partigruppering och opinionsförskjutningar i svensk politik 1890–1902* (Stockholm: Lantbruksförbundets Tidsskrifts AB, 1953), 130–31.
- 39 Motions to the second chamber 1892, No 24, pp. 6–7. The second chamber debate on the motion was held on 16 March and is found in the eighteenth book of protocols from the ordinary (*lagtima*) 1892 Riksdag.
- 40 Mankell is a legend of nineteenth century radical liberalism in Sweden. Cf. Victor Lundberg, “‘Den siste af de typiske 1848 års män i Sverige.’ Anteckningar om Julius Mankell och den svenska demokratins förhistoria,” *Historisk Tidskrift* 125, no. 3 (2005): 421–40.
- 41 For the proposals and debates of 1897, 1898 and 1899 and the votes see Westerstähl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, 248–51; Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen*, 289–92.
- 42 Of the 30 farmer MPs in favour of the law, all but three belonged to the ultra-conservative Agrarian movement. This was influenced by the German *Bund der Landwirte* and was one of the centres of the ultra-right in Swedish politics around 1900. Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen*, 162–64, 247–69, 400. The BdL plays an important role in German historical research on the right-inclined legacy of modern German politics – i.e. Hans-Jürgen Puhle, “Lords and Peasants in the Kaiserreich,” in *Peasants and Lords in Modern Germany*, ed. Robert G. Moeller (Boston: George Allen and Unwin, 1986), 89–97, 81–109 – but their Swedish counterpart is under-researched except for the pioneering work of Carlsson.
- 43 On supporters and opponents of the proposal, see Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen*, 293–97; Westerstähl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, 244.
- 44 In an interesting episode, the 1899 Åkarp Law influenced the German government, which in May 1899 presented an equivalent proposal in their country. Interestingly enough, this law did not pass the German Reichstag; the historian Sten Carlsson comments that “In a country like Germany with universal suffrage and strong industrialization, such a class law could not be imposed through parliament”. Carlsson, *Lantmannapolitiken och industrialismen*, 297.
- 45 From 1899 to 1938, 813 people were sentenced under the Åkarp law. Of these, 193 were sentenced to prison and 37 to penal labour; the rest to fines. Eklund, *Rätten i klasskampen*, 325–26.
- 46 Jan O. Berg, *På spaning efter en svensk modell: idéer och vägval i arbetsgivarpolitiken 1897–1909* (Enebyberg: Berg Bild Rum & Färg Förlag, 2011), 114, cf. 177.
- 47 Åke Lindström, *Bruksarbetarfackföreningar: Metalls avdeeling vid bruken i östra Västmanlands län före 1911* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1979), 28–36.
- 48 Berg, *På spaning*, Ch. 3. On the freedom to organise, see 89.
- 49 Berg, *På spaning*, 203. The quotation from 1908: 281.
- 50 Nycander, *Makten över arbetsmarknaden*, 25–27; Fransson, “Freedom of Contract,” 238.
- 51 Ingvar Flink, *Strejkbryteriet och arbetets frihet: En studie av svensk arbetsmarknad fram till 1938* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1978). The figures on strikebreaking are from Flink, Table 2 and 112, 133, 137.
- 52 Yngve Myrman, *Maktkampen på arbetsmarknaden 1905–1907: en studie av de icke-socialistiska arbetarna som faktor i arbetsgivarpolitiken* (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, 1973).
- 53 Thomas Paster, *The Role of Business in the Development of the Welfare State and Labor Markets in Germany: Containing Social Reforms* (London: Routledge, 2012), Chs. 3, 5.

- 54 France appears to have taken a more conflictual route around 1906. Roger Magraw, *Workers and the Bourgeois Republic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 49–52.
- 55 Cf. the articles on strikebreaking in the special issue of *European History Quarterly*, No. 4 2019 and especially Millan, “Introduction”. See also the other chapters of this volume.
- 56 Bengtsson, “The Swedish Sonderweg.”
- 57 Bernt Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909: Förhistoria och orsaker* (Copenhagen, Bergen, Gothenburg, Stockholm and Lund: Scandinavian University Books, 1967). On the various wage conflicts see especially pp. 171–98. On the strategic considerations of employers, pp. 198–204. On the recurring LO debates on a general strike, pp. 209–21. On why the LO finally decided for general strike in 1909, pp. 226–30.
- 58 On the aftermath of the strike and the bouncing back of the unions, see for example Lundh, *Spelets regler*, 104–5; Klas Åmark, *Facklig makt och fackligt medlemskap: De svenska fackförbundens medlemsutveckling 1890–1940* (Lund: Arkiv, 1986), 96–114.
- 59 Cf. for example Garon’s study of industrial relations experts and social statisticians in the British Board of Trade. Sheldon Garon, “Social Knowledge and the State in the Industrial Relations of Japan (1882–1940) and Great Britain (1870–1914),” in *States, Social Knowledge, and the Origins of Modern Social Policies*, ed. Dietrich Rueschmeyer and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 264–95.
- 60 Marika Hedin, *Ett liberalt dilemma: Ernst Beckman, Emilia Broomé, G H von Koch och den sociala frågan 1880–1930* (Stockholm and Stehag: Symposium, 2002), 92–95.
- 61 Westerståhl, *Svensk fackföreningsrörelse*, 254–60, 299 on the 1906 reform. On Beckman and urban liberalism see Hedin, *Ett liberalt dilemma*. On A. P. Danielsson see Erik Bengtsson and Mats Olsson “Peasant Aristocrats? Wealth and Social Status of Swedish Farmer Parliamentarians 1769–1895,” *Scandinavian Journal of History*, published online February 27, 2020.
- 62 Schiller, *Storstrejken 1909: förhistoria och orsaker*, 55. Elmquist later became the first head of the National Board of Health and Welfare (Socialstyrelsen) as well as Minister of Social Affairs.
- 63 Kerstin Enflo and Tobias Karlsson, “From Conflict to Compromise: The Importance of Mediation in Swedish Work Stoppages 1907–1927,” CEPR Discussion Paper 12586 (London: Centre for Economic Policy Research, 2018).
- 64 Eklund, *Rätten i klasskampen*, 241.
- 65 Gerry R. Rubin, “The Historical Development of Collective Labour Law: The United Kingdom,” in *The Rise and Development of Collective Labour Law*, ed. Marcel Van der Linden and Richard Price (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2000), 291–350. On collective laissez faire see pp. 307–8. On comparisons with Britain see also Garon, “Social Knowledge”.
- 66 James Fulcher, “On the Explanation of Industrial Relations Diversity: Labour Movements, Employers and the State in Britain and Sweden,” *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 26, no. 2 (1988): 253.
- 67 Bengtsson and Olsson, “Peasant Aristocrats?”
- 68 Francis G. Castles, “Barrington Moore’s Thesis and Swedish Political Development,” *Government and Opposition* 8, no. 3 (1973): 313–31. Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Bases of the European Welfare State 1875–1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
- 69 Nilsson, *Elitens svängrum*.
- 70 Charles Tilly, *Popular Contention in Great Britain 1758–1834* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), esp. pp. 37–48. The quote is from p. 367.