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Rhetorics of Nordic Democracy

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CARL MARKLUND

Sharing Values and Shaping Values

Sweden, ‘Nordic Democracy’ and the American Crisis of Democracy

Three elements – consensus, democracy and welfare – have been central aspects of the dominant post-war story about Norden. In this story, however, the Nordic countries usually appear as somehow (pre)determined to achieve consensus, democracy and welfare. Alternative routes and critical junctures, as well as mirages and visions at the ‘horizon of expectation’ are often overshadowed by the familiar but also rather unilinear or even ‘essentializing’ gaze upon the Nordic countries, from within as well as from without. It is somewhere here, in this complex of self-confidence and self-doubt about the characteristics and qualities of Nordic political culture – on the part of Nordics as well as non-Nordics – that the concept of Nordic democracy emerges and comes into play in the ‘philosophical geography’ which finds democracy particularly at home in the North.¹

This chapter will take a closer look at this philosophical geography. It will do so by asking how the notion of Nordic democracy has been expressed in primarily American and to a lesser extent British and Swedish accounts of Sweden from the interwar era onwards.² In what ways did this interest in Sweden shift over time due to the changing needs of various

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² These American outlooks on the Nordic countries must be put in context: Americans had throughout much of the 1800s considered themselves liberated from many of the woes of the Old World, a view reinforced by the continuous flow of emigrants vouching for the superiority of the American way of life. However, as recurring financial crises hit just as hard in the USA as in Europe and as some European states proved more swift and seemingly more efficient in their response to the consequences of the Great Crash in October 1929, many Americans began to look to Great Britain as well as Fascist Italy, Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union for theoretical and practical inspiration. The American interest in the Nordic countries was paralleled by an American interest in any society that seemed to do comparatively better in the economic downturn of the early 1930s. See, for example, Schivelbusch, Wolfgang (2006) *Three New Deals: Reflection on Roosevelt’s America, Mussolini’s Italy, and Hitler’s Germany, 1933–1939*, New York: Metropolitan Books; Rodgers, Daniel T. (1998) *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
actors? Does the construction of the American understanding of Nordic democracy challenge or confirm the established narratives of the Nordic countries mentioned above? In asking these questions, the chapter seeks to find the link between the Nordic countries and democracy in the context of the wider ‘crisis of democracy’ during the interwar years and in particular the American version of this crisis.

The difference between the crisis of democracy in America and in Europe is not an idle one: seen from the perspective of the European crisis of democracy, the prime achievement of the Nordic countries was their general commitment to political democracy. As shown by several of the contributions to this volume, this underlined Nordic self-identification during the Second World War. Seen from the perspective of the American crisis of democracy, however, more specific aspects of democracy, such as ‘economic democracy’, ‘industrial democracy’ and ‘planning democracy’, proved more inspiring, for a variety of reasons.

American references to Nordic democracy seldom implied any particular ideology of democracy on the part of the Nordics. Instead, the Nordic countries seemed to embody a particularly democratic practice of conciliation – a practice of consensus, cooperation, and tolerance, without which democracy would indeed become a mere formality, a dead letter, which some of democracy’s most vocal and influential critics in Europe indeed argued it had already become.

In order to trace the origin of this American interest in Nordic democracy in general and the industrial democracy of Sweden in particular, the present chapter first follows some of the earliest associations between the Nordic countries and democracy in Anglo-American academic literature. It attempts to situate the rhetorical function of this association within the context of the American crisis of democracy during the interwar years. The chapter then briefly outlines the differences and similarities between the American crisis of democracy and the European one. It then goes on to compare this American notion of Swedish industrial democracy with some Swedish attempts to add planning democracy and economic democracy – for example, egalitarian social policy and welfare state formation – to the already firmly established image of Swedish industrial democracy in the USA. This image of Sweden as a prime site for both industrial democracy and planning democracy is then followed through the immediate post-war decades as it becomes conceptually associated with corporatism and gradually construed as a largely satisfied ‘happy democracy’ of ‘created harmony’. In American eyes, Sweden had shifted from being an example of a particular brand of ‘democracy’ into becoming a showcase for a special kind of ‘socialism’.

In conclusion, it is argued that these recurrent American references to Sweden and democracy – appreciative as well as critical ones – focused less upon political democracy than upon the economic, industrial and planning dimensions of democracy, all of which fulfilled particular roles in the American debate on democracy during the interwar and immediate post-war years.

*From ‘Northern democracies’ to ‘Northern democracy’*

The earliest explicit conceptual connection between the Nordic countries on the one hand and the democratic form of governance on the other seems to have followed almost immediately upon the introduction of political democracy in all the Nordic countries by the early 1900s. During the interwar years, Denmark, Norway, Sweden and, to a lesser extent, Finland would gradually become known internationally as the ‘northern democracies’, not least in the USA. This concept, however, merely took note of the fact that the democratic system of governance prevailed in the Nordic countries. It did not suggest that these countries in some way presented any particular ‘Nordic’ form of democracy.

To some observers, however, due to their coordinated activity within the League of Nations, the small Nordic countries came to exemplify ‘the democratic control’ of what was elsewhere in the hands of secretive diplomats and jealously guarded by great power interest. By emphasising the theory of the equality of states, the representatives of Denmark, Norway and Sweden were regularly looked upon as spokesmen for the smaller states of the world, as S. Shepard Jones pointed out on the eve of the Second World War.

The connection between smallness and democracy would deepen during the 1920s and 1930s, primarily through the notion of community. Modernity was seen as producing a mass society inhabited by ‘mass humans’ lacking a sense of community and destiny and hence making collective action in the common interest more unlikely. While mass society was seen as more complex than earlier human societies and hence more difficult to govern with traditional means, including formal political democracy, it also, quite paradoxically, appeared to level human beings into mass humans, supposedly less individualistic and more easily. In this way, whatever the intentions of various critics of modernity and mass society for its lack of


community might have been, their critique also tended to explain not only the increasing possibility of dictatorship, but also its growing necessity.6

Furthermore, urbanisation, industrialisation and the concentration of economic power seemed to threaten not only the virtues of democracy, but also the very culture and lifestyle which had made democracy a preferred mode of governance to begin with. Small-scale business, farming and living in villages and townships were increasingly eclipsed by gigantic corporations, farmers becoming indebted to banks, and the young moving to industrial cities. If it was ever going to be possible to re-create some sense of community, it would have to be based upon the realities of a new national mass-scale society and not on any nostalgic longing for some primordial village, now long lost. This sentiment was not necessarily a reaction to economic or political crisis, but rather to change per se. In the USA, for example, already during the prosperous 1920s, social scientists voiced concern that the decreasing sense of community in modern American mass culture could adversely affect American democracy and hence threaten ‘American civilization’.7

While this criticism of mass society and this praise of the bucolic existence of small farming communities certainly had deep roots in the Western intellectual tradition, both gained a more acute edge under the influence of financial instability in the wake of the First World War culminating in the Great Crash in 1929. The alleged inability of democratic regimes to contain and control the effects of unfettered global capitalism – in addition to its many other shortcomings – added a third and even more critical edge to the mounting criticism of democracy; the promise of dictatorship. The critics of democracy argued that this form of government could not efficiently handle situations where choices and prioritizations would have to be made efficiently and quickly – either because of the cumbersome deliberative process of democracy in itself, or because the democratic system had been captured by vested interests looking out for their own needs, rather than the public interest.8

Here, there were important differences between the European and the American understandings of the crisis of democracy. In the American debate, the crisis of democracy primarily resulted from the perceived failure of democracy to deliver the goods (at the time identified as economic stability.


7 While most of these tendencies are identifiable in French and German sociological writings of the late 1800s, many American works of empirical sociology from the interwar years were influenced by this perspective, most notably Lynd, Robert S. & Lynd, Helen Merrell (1929) Middletown: A Study in American Culture, London: Constable.

8 Elements of this criticism were also common in the fascist charge against democracy, but were by no means confined to totalitarian groups.
and social security, and often subsumed under the caption of ‘general welfare’). This failure of democracy had pragmatic as well as ideological consequences: Pragmatically, in order to survive, democracy needed to be made more rational to resist middle-class alienation, possibly through social planning and the reshaping of cultural values. Ideologically, in order to convince, democracy needed to be made more resilient in facing down totalitarianism, which was capitalising on middle-class alienation, possibly through cultural conditioning and propaganda.

Lacking either a strong labour movement or more radical political parties, except for some populist movements, the American crisis of democracy thus evolved into a rather technical debate on whether democracy could be brought to control the economy effectively, rather than any moral or principled political question of the precedence of democracy over dictatorship. The European crisis of democracy, by contrast, was more closely connected with the articulation of the special interests of a dominant force – be it the working class, the empire, the race, the nation or simply ‘power’ – in whose name dictatorship would take precedence over democracy.

The decline of democracy elsewhere contrasted with the resilience of democracy in the Nordic countries. Hence, the latter began to attract attention abroad during the course of the 1930s. In a book entitled The Smaller Democracies (1939), the British author E. D. Simon emphasized the value of smallness and equality for ‘really democratic achievements’ at a moment ‘when democracy is challenged throughout the world’, in the words of one reviewer. To Simon, it was above all Switzerland that showcased how ‘the practical experience of administrative work shared by all members of the smaller communes creates a sense of civic responsibility and a fund of ability for administration on a wider scale’.

Not only big societies seemed to veer in the direction of dictatorship, however. Less populous countries also experienced the tensions of modern mass society. They were not immune to the lure of dictatorship, in particular through the temptation to expand the executive power in the face of a crisis. In 1937, for example, Karl Loewenstein, a German legal scholar and part of the Central European intellectual exodus to the USA after the Nazi Machtübernahme, noted that:

Everywhere [in Europe] constitutional government is in transition from parliamentary determination of political issues to the undisputed predominance of the executive, operating, even in the most thoroughly democratic countries, under discretionary powers which, very euphemistically, may be spoken of as “quasi-constitutional.” Indicative of this trend – observable in every constitutional state without exception – are the events in the smaller democracies which more and more have become “disciplined,” or even “authoritarian”.

In particular, Loewenstein found that the ‘smaller democracies’ of Belgium, Switzerland, and Czechoslovakia, had begun to make use of what he euphemistically termed ‘new governmental techniques’. Somewhat earlier, the Swedish political scientist Herbert Tingsten had noted this development in his *Les pleins pouvoirs* (1934). In agreement with Tingsten, Loewenstein argued that:

All democratic countries are at present in search of a workable formula which will guarantee the responsibility and the control of democratic leaders to and by the masses. It remains to be seen whether the traditional concepts of legality and constitutionality can be reconciled with the realistic necessities of national leadership.

To Loewenstein then, the trend towards extra-ordinary authorisations and the expansion of executive power did not necessarily imply the demise of democracy in Europe. Rather, it could be seen as democracy’s last ditch defence against the adverse effects of modernity and capitalism, without which democracy would be exposed to the threat of authoritarianism. In fact, democracy had much to learn from dictatorship about ‘direct popular action’ – ‘this most fascinating and important problem of organized mass democracy where the constitutional state has so much to gain from close observation of the techniques of dictatorial states’, Loewenstein contended in 1937. Democracy’s main fault, then, in the eyes of this transatlantic legal scholar, was that it largely failed to mobilise the masses in the way that dictatorship did. This is also why he took a particular interest in those European countries where democracy nevertheless seemed to hold on, such as in the Nordic countries. How did they manage to mobilise popular support for democracy in view of its alleged inefficiency?

Neither the prevalence of constitutional and parliamentary democracy, nor the cooperation in the League of Nations or the praise of smallness did by themselves suffice to promote a specific international image of the Nordic countries as representing any particular form of democracy. In his review of the American author Franklin D. Scott’s *The United States and Scandinavia* (1950) in the *American Historical Review*, the Norwegian historian and Foreign Minister (1935–1940) Halvdan Koht aligned the primarily geopolitical notion of northern democracies with the primarily socio-economic concept of northern democracy. By this time, the idea

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12 Loewenstein 1937, 956–957.
13 Loewenstein 1937, 955.
14 Koht, Halvdan (1950) ‘Review: The United States and Scandinavia by Franklin D. Scott’. *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 56, No. 1, 73–74. The concept of ‘northern democracy’ had been in common use in American historical and political debate during the interwar years, but it referred to the anti-slavery ideology of Northern Democrats during the American Civil War – one of the greatest tests of American political democracy – rather than any particular form of democracy on the part of the Nordic states. See, for example, Foxer, Eric (1980) *Politics and Ideology in the Age of the Civil War: New
that the northern democracies – primarily understood as the Scandinavian countries, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden – exhibited a particular form of northern democracy had become firmly established and was readily accepted. The chapter will in the following seek to find what had happened in the meantime to explain this merging of concepts, this cultural-substantive rather than geographical-formal association between democracy and the Nordic countries.

Capital and labour: collective bargaining and industrial democracy

Largely due to the popularity of his 1936 book Sweden: The Middle Way, but also to counter the somewhat unrealistic expectations which the readers of his earlier book pinned on Sweden, the American journalist Marquis W. Childs returned to the topic of Sweden in This is Democracy (1938).\(^{15}\)

In this book, Childs noted that the perceived peacefulness of the Nordic countries was largely a much cherished myth abroad. According to the statistics of the International Labour Office (ILO), the Nordic countries in fact had experienced some of the world’s highest losses of man-hours due to conflict on the labour market in the preceding decade.\(^{16}\) Instead, ‘these northern democracies’ were indeed democratic ‘with all the virtues and all the faults inherent in the democratic form’. As such, they not only represented an experiment in a theoretical sense – indeed, all democracies could be understood as continuous experiments, according to Childs – but also in more practical terms as their democratic form of government would only be able to survive if it could cope with the tensions brought about by modernity.\(^{17}\) They, too, had their fair share of conflict, and this is what made their experience well worth studying abroad.

According to Childs, it was largely the smallness of the national market and its openness to the international market which had prompted Swedish labour and Swedish capital to bargain and cooperate, partly in spite of the many reasons for conflict, but also partly exactly due to these conflicts. But market logic was not enough, as the political collaboration between labour and ‘Liberals and Farmers’ showed.\(^{18}\) This political collaboration would have been impossible if it had not been for the conscious strategy of the Labour movement to ‘broaden’ its base to include not only workers, but farmers and the middle class, too, Childs argued.\(^{19}\) In Childs’s mind, this

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\(^{16}\) Childs, Marquis W. (1938) This is Democracy: Collective Bargaining in Scandinavia, New Haven: Yale University Press, xi–xii, 156.

\(^{17}\) Childs 1938, xvi.

\(^{18}\) Childs 1938, xi.

\(^{19}\) Childs identified the trade-union congress of 1936 as particularly important in establishing this new broader policy. Childs 1938, 16.
broader labour movement and its capacity in bridging the gaps between city and country, between the middle class and the working class and between capital and labour was the primary factor in shaping and sharing the values which provided the basis for the Swedish ‘experiment’ in democracy.

However, there was a rift between the conservative older generation and the younger generation on this issue. This division came to the fore in the labour exposition put on by the social democratic youth organization in Stockholm in the fall of 1937 under the theme ‘Organized Labour Has the Word’ where the class struggle and the revolutionary traditions of the labour movement figured prominently, symbolised by the Adalen shootings of 1931 where troops had fired upon demonstrators and killed five people.20

In Childs’s account, members of the Social Democratic government had to navigate a careful middle-road. This moderation sometimes came under criticism from the Left for not being socialist enough. Childs found Prime Minister Per Albin Hansson particularly ‘sensitive to criticism that their policy has been too cautious’. In response to radical socialists and their demands for the socialisation of the nation’s industries, Hansson argued that ‘the government is building socialism into the fabric of the country’s everyday life’.21 Swedish socialism – rather than Swedish democracy, it should be noted – thus exemplified a particularly far-ranging and radical transformation of public mores, a theme which would become more prevalent in American reporting on Swedish society in the post-war decades.

Despite these challenges from within the labour movement, Hansson was deeply conscious of the need for middle-class support, Childs argued. The majority of the labour movement remained ‘98.9 per cent loyal to Per Albin’ and ‘the blue-and-yellow [i.e., Swedish national colours] line he has taken’, Childs assured his readers.22 Trade unionists had come up against the realisation that a limit had been reached in the size of the share of the national income that labour could obtain ‘by present tactics and within the limits of the present economy’. If labour’s share is to be increased, Childs interpreted them as saying, production must be greatly expanded – a need recognized by both labour and capital.23 It was largely due to these considerations, Childs argued, that labour in Sweden – as in the other small Nordic countries – had turned to bargaining: first, labour had used collective wage bargaining, and second, labour had bargained ‘at the polls for political power’.

In this alliance for growth, trade unionists and capitalists had begun to share the central tenets of how to conduct business and industry. Previously, Childs asserted, trade unions had primarily been striving to obtain the highest possible wage, which at times made them uncertain allies of the political branch of the labour movement. In this new capacity, as partners, both employers and trade unions began to see wages as an element of ‘cost’ in a business in which they themselves were share-holders, and that this was ‘a business that is related directly to their own standard of living’. This

20 Childs 1938, 18–19.
21 Childs 1938, 70.
22 Childs 1938, 18.
23 Childs 1938, 159–160.
‘complex relationship’ had direct links to the increasing peace and unabated ‘progress in the northern democracies’, Childs thought. Fundamentally, the new attitude among the trade unions and the labour movement more widely amounted to what Childs described as ‘industrial democracy’, albeit on an experimental level:

Realizing the limitations inherent in old forms – in the narrow, craft concept – they are struggling to find new forms adapted to an industrial civilization. It is not easy. There is the dead weight of inertia, of prejudice, of ancient self-interest. But if this experiment in industrial democracy is not upset by the disaster of war, it may well bring achievements that will have significance for democracy everywhere.

Industrial democracy was a long-standing concept in the Anglo-American debate on modernity, industrial relations and socialism. The concept had first been used more widely by the noted British Fabian socialists Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb to connote a more peaceful cooperation between the two sides of the productive process, labour and capital. The concept referred to a kind of economic democracy in the workplace either to complement or, in more radical versions, to replace political democracy in modern society. Industrial democracy would secure industrial peace and hence promote the productivity and profitability of private enterprise. The bigger the profits, the more evenly they could be shared between capital and labour. Hence, industrial democracy could improve the standing of the working class as well as establish a more democratic culture and economy which would – the argument went – control capitalism, humanise modernity, balance liberalism and possibly stabilise the international order, thereby preventing further imperialist wars such as the First World War. Through industrial democracy, political democracy could be liberated from the stifling influence of vested interests and turned into a truer democracy.

In a fundamental sense, industrial democracy presupposed an alliance between labour and capital which could be negotiated in each individual firm. There were indeed many attempts at brokering such agreements not only in Great Britain but in the USA as well. What seemed to the American observer unique and exemplary in Sweden was the nation-wide character of these agreements as well as the fact that they were increasingly based on a coalition between middle-class and working-class interests, i.e., reaching beyond the confines of the individual firm. Quite naturally, then, the greatest risks posed to this kind of industrial democracy could be found in whichever power that seeks to break the emerging confidence and cooperation between labour and capital. Any successful attempt at destabilising the fragile entente between middle class and labour class interests would also effectively destabilize industrial democracy. The strategy of the broader labour

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24 Childs 1938, 138.
25 Childs 1938, 160.
movement was hence largely to be seen as an ‘effort of labor politicians to adjust to the threat of world Fascism’.27

In the Nordic countries, the threat of fascism28 united external security with internal security in complex and very tangible ways after 1933, primarily due to the economic dependence and geographical proximity of Germany. As for the external threat of fascism, the Nordic countries began in the late 1930s to regard ‘collective security’ as offered by the League of Nations as illusory. The combination of aggressive totalitarians and the inefficiency of the League of Nations thus fostered a closer cooperation between the Nordic countries with regard to security as well as a more explicit identification between neutrality and Nordicity on their part. While an outright attack on any of the Nordic countries did not appear to be a very credible threat at the end of the 1930s, the Austrian Anschluss of 1938 provided a chilling example of how a more confident Germany could assert itself vis-à-vis neighbouring countries.

Also the internal threat of fascism had to be taken seriously, as the Austrian case illustrated.29 Certain industrial interests, Childs noted, ‘look with a kind of envy on the freedom from labour trouble enjoyed by businessmen in Germany’, but their numbers appeared small.30 In the minds of Swedish (and Norwegian) Social Democrats, Childs held, the inability of the labour movement in Germany and Austria in stemming the fascist advance had resulted from ‘the failure of the Left to realize what were the realities outside the closed sphere of Socialist and Marxist dogma’.31 Labour’s first task must therefore be:

to win over the middle class. The middle class must be convinced that its advantage lies with labor. This was the mistake that German and Austrian Socialists made. They thought in terms of the proletariat, narrowly defined, a trade-union monopoly, ignoring middle-class low income groups, white-collar workers, and farmers, who had far less than the official proletariat. It is not enough merely to fight for higher trade-union wages.32

Again, Childs emphasized how Scandinavian labour leaders realized that the totalizing and nationalist attitude of the fascists had to be copied in order to be countered and the importance of considering ‘the whole economy and our place in that economy’, and not merely class interests.33 Among other

27 Childs 1938, xvi.
28 In the following, ‘Fascism’ connotes Italian Fascism, while ‘fascism’ indicates fascism in general, thus including American, German, Eastern European and Scandinavian versions of right-wing extremism.
30 Childs 1938, 74.
31 Childs 1938, 76.
32 Childs 1938, 77.
33 Childs 1938, 77.
things, this strategy necessitated a de-dramatization of the class struggle motif in the political profile and rhetoric of the labour movement.34

City and country: sharing values and shaping values

The challenge for this new broader labour movement not only lay in the need to bridge the gap between capital and labour and between the middle class and the working class. It also had to span the rift between the rapidly modernising city and the traditional countryside with its mostly conservative and often religious farmers. This opposition between farmer and worker and between city and country was not merely a Nordic concern. Societies all over the world sought to cope with the radical shift in production from small-scale subsistence farming to large mechanised and capital-intensive forms of agriculture for the export market. The ensuing conflict between city and country was of no little importance, in the eyes of contemporaries. Childs himself went so far as to conclude that ‘here, it would seem, is one of the profound maladies from which the present-day world is suffering. And somehow a cure must be found if representative government is to survive’.35

This is where the ‘northern democracies’ could provide an opportunity to look at this problem without too many complicating factors, ‘with a kind of laboratory detachment’, as Childs put it: ‘Partly this is because they are small countries with a homogeneous population.’ But even more importantly, this sense of mission came from an emotional and moral conviction: Scandinavians simply felt deeply ‘the seriousness of the problem and the urgent need for a solution’, and this feeling was apparently widely shared across public opinion.36 In Scandinavia, homogeneity and small size promoted a sense of shared values and nowhere – according to Childs – was this sense of shared convictions greater than in the opinion that the ‘future of Western civilization may turn on the possibility of resolving the deep opposition between the townsman and the countryman’.37

At the heart of this opposition we find a rather mundane factor: in the same way as workers in advanced capitalist economies across the world typically sought higher wages and employers sought lower wages, they also strove for lower prices for food while farmers aimed for higher prices. The Swedish labour movement – like most of its international counterparts

34 Childs pointed for example to the connections between Swedish and Norwegian labour leaders who had spent time in the USA as members of the ultra-radical Industrial Workers of the World (I.W.W.) (e.g., Edvard Mattson and Martin Tranmael), who have become ‘somewhat tempered’ on their return to Scandinavia. Childs 1938, 10–11, 81.
35 Childs, for example, points to the importance for world history of the split between workers and farmers, between city and country in Germany (where small landowners supported the Nazis) and in Russia (where the kulaks came close to bringing the Bolsheviks’ regime down). See Childs 1938, 85.
36 Childs 1938, 85.
37 Childs 1938, 85.
had traditionally been firmly committed to free trade, while Swedish conservatives could long rely on the support of farmers by following a more protectionist trade policy, at least with regard to farming products.

The farmer-worker alliance brought in by the so-called Cow Trade in May 1933, also known as the Crisis Agreement, rested upon a compromise between these opposite interests, ensuring some state aid to agriculture in exchange for some free trade. The effect was to shore up farm purchasing power, but it also disadvantaged low income groups, especially families with children, not only among city-dwelling workers but among the rural poor as well. This tactical victory ensured that the Social Democrats remained in power. At the same time it presented the party with a strategic challenge, as this alliance maintained the disadvantage of poor labourers both in the city and in the country. How to change the situation without imperilling the newly won alliance with the farmers, or, in the words of Childs: ‘How to alter political values without alienating farm support?’

In Childs’s account of Sweden, then, it seems as if there may have been shared values concerning the goal of bridging the gap between city and country, but there was no corresponding consensus on the means by which to bring this bridging about. The farmer-labour alliance identified the poverty of the living conditions of the urban poor with the poverty of the rural poor, making it possible to shape new values where none had been shared previously. Together with the widespread concern that the Swedish population had begun to decline – a concern which Childs does not seem to have treated at any length – the shared plight of the rural and urban poor motivated the appointment by the government of the Population Commission, authorised to look into every aspect of the Swedish standard of living.

The picture presented was not flattering to ‘the ego of the average Swede, proud of the progressiveness of his country’. Coded in the cool rational language of medical and economic terms concerning public health, contagion and worker productivity, the reports also sparked a more emotional debate about ‘minimum standards of decency’ and ‘shockingly low [living] standards’. As a consequence, the national standard of living became a sharp political issue, based on common conceptions of what ‘decency’ and ‘standards’ really meant. The political strategy was to use shock tactics and ‘startle the Swedes out of their complacency’. As the report presented by the commission and signed by ‘national leaders’ argued, problems such as malnutrition, overcrowding and low wages, ‘surely could not be reduced to terms of mere partisanship’. Instead, the Commission identified the ‘basic’ problem for which, strictly speaking, there could be nothing other than ‘technical’ solutions, thereby bypassing a number of stifling cultural, political and social stumbling blocks, or, in Childs’s interpretation:

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38 Childs 1938, 91–92.
39 Childs 1938, 92.
40 Childs 1938, 94.
If the people are hungry, then feed them. Could there possibly be any political argument about that? The Socialists proposed to give free lunches to all public school children in Sweden. Not just to children in need of such feeding, for that would serve to put an undemocratic stigma on hunger, but to all children.\footnote{Childs 1938, 96.}

The Commission’s work, here interpreted by Childs for an Anglo-American audience, thus represented a novel connection between economy and democracy, between equality and representation, which would provide a platform for the universalist approach in social policy, later to be made one of the distinguishing trademarks of Nordic welfare-state regimes.\footnote{Esping-Andersen, Gosta (1990) \textit{The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism} Cambridge and Princeton: Polity Press and Princeton University Press.} To some extent, then, the real value of the Commission was to be found in the way in which it ‘objectively’ identified social needs and social problems, showed the similarity of the plight of the poor in both city and country. At the same time, it pointed to shared values of decency and living standards among the well-to-do.

While the American as well as European crisis of democracy let loose a flood of various proposals on how to stem the current financial downturn and how to make liberal democracy more able to handle its consequences, the American critic Roy V. Peel was surprised at what he perceived to be a lack of radical proposals in favour of democracy in Sweden:

> Where is the vast body of Swedish liberal literature corresponding to our own output during this time? There is not any. This is true, because, for one thing, nearly all Swedes are moderate, and there is therefore no need for polemical writing.\footnote{Peel, Roy V. (1937) ‘Samhällskrisen och Socialvetenskaperna by Gunnar Myrdal; Herbert Tingsten Unghoger: Politiska Essayer by Gunner Heckscher Pontus Fahlbeck och Samhallet by Erik Arthen’, \textit{The American Political Science Review}, Vol. 31, No. 2, 333.}

Swedish supporters of democracy did not have to argue in favour of improving democracy, Peel found, as the majority of the political establishment continued to perceive it as a functional and successful form of government, despite its crisis elsewhere. The Swedish system of Royal Committees played an important role here, Peel thought, arguing that few legislative novelties are ever introduced without a previous survey of the subject by experts, drawn from all parties and representing ‘all shades of opinion’.\footnote{For example, after the contentious issue of socialisation had first been raised by the first Social Democratic government in the 1920s, it was subsequently put under scrutiny by several committees, headed by among others Richard Sandler and Torsten Nothin. The resulting reports served to shelve this political hot potato for some considerable time (it would only return in 1944 under the stewardship of Ernst Wigforss). Walter Sandellius, in 1934, called to attention that the thoroughly organized system of committees in the Riksdag almost worked as a second government – warranting Nils Hedlitz’ characterization of Sweden as an example of ‘committee parliamentarism’. See Sandellius 1934, 347–371. See also Skocpol, Theda & Weir, Margaret (1985) ‘State Structures and the Possibilities of Action’ in Charles E. Meridith (ed.) \textit{Democracy and Social Justice: Political Power and Preferential Development in Western Europe}, Cambridge University Press.}
As an example of this, Peel mentioned the opinions of two Swedish Social Democrats (Gunnar Myrdal and Herbert Tingsten), one representative of the Young Conservatives (Gunnar Heckscher) and one ‘regular’ conservative (Erik Arrhen), commenting that ‘to the uninitiated, it is amazing how often the views of all these men coincide’:

Myrdal and Tingsten differ from their friends on the right, not in the measure of their devotion to democratic forms of government, but in their choice of problems to be attacked immediately. They, i.e., Myrdal and Tingsten, believe in turning all the intellectual forces in the realm to the promotion of stability and order on a higher level. They want the condition of the poor improved, they want the traditionally Swedish democratic instruments of government safe-guarded and strengthened – because they have faith in the common man – and they expect to win universal adherence to their program because they believe that it is the only intelligent way to proceed.\footnote{45}

To this American observer, the commitment of Swedish academics and experts – so influential through the system of Royal Committees – to democracy was unfailing. This becomes particularly obvious in Peel’s discussion of the Swedish conservatives, who had been accused of flirting with fascist ideology. To Peel, by contrast, the programme of the conservatives was strongly liberal and their objective was ‘a class-differentiated but cooperating state’. It was decidedly not fascist, according to Peel, as ‘race-hate, intolerance, regimentation, etc.’ had been convincingly discredited in the eyes of Swedish conservatives by the German and Italian examples.\footnote{46} In contrast to fascists, Swedish conservatives of different backgrounds accepted proportional representation, equality before the law, a measure of government intervention and ‘even ultimate public planning and ownership, fundamentally because it feels that these principles are suitable for the Swedish nation with its special conditions of resource, tradition, and background’.\footnote{47} The specific Nordic penchant for democracy is underlined once more.

The difference between Left and Right in Sweden did not lie in opinions about ‘the democratic form of government, academic freedom, and freedom of discussion’, as ‘both sides vie with each other in maintaining them’, Peel noted. Rather the cleavage was to be found in presuppositions regarding the ‘world’ or ‘life’, Peel asserted.

As Myrdal insists, conservatives, and even liberals, are bound by their hypotheses regarding the relation between classes, the limits to the

\footnote{45} Peel 1937, 333.
\footnote{46} Peel 1937, 333.
\footnote{47} Peel 1937, 334.
authority of the state, and the indestructibility and immutability of certain institutions, whereas the objective political scientists merely describe what exists, then recommend experimentation as a guide to further action. This is, in Sweden, the socialist view.\textsuperscript{48}

In this sense, Peel’s summary of the position of Myrdal and Tingsten largely resemble the classic understanding of Scandinavian legal realism and first generation ‘Hägerströmian’ value nihilism.\textsuperscript{49} Legal realists and value nihilists typically regarded legal and moral concepts of justice, liberty or rights – in civil law and criminal law as well as in constitutional law – as devoid of any inherent value or universal meaning by themselves. These conceptions were merely the constructions and expressions of power and its drive to promote desired behaviour, mainly understood as peace and security. Within the ontological framework of Scandinavian legal realism, democracy could not represent any inherent value in itself. Its only meaning was as an expression of the power which either wished to maintain it or to do away with it.\textsuperscript{50} As long as democracy was conceptually and rhetorically construed as a given in this Nordic society, it needed no further defence in the ontological universe of legal realists and value nihilists.

The idea that Sweden – as well as the other Nordic countries – somehow exhibited a particular affinity for democracy was therefore of paramount importance for the political culture within which legal realism, value nihilism and the welfare state began to form during the 1930s. While American as well as Swedish observers seem to have taken this assumption largely for granted, it is worth looking at some of the few attempts to explain where this expressive preference for a democratic world-view originally came from.

Noting that Sweden was not only very small and homogeneous, which fostered a sense of intimacy, but was also one of the most organised societies in the world, Childs argued that Swedish citizens had several organisations through which they could channel their energies and express their opinions and interests.\textsuperscript{51} To Childs, this presented Swedish society with an almost unique opportunity to rejuvenate the notion of democracy and counter the challenges of modern mass society. Pointing to the paradox between liberty and discipline in modern life, Childs argued that:

\textsuperscript{48} Peel 1937, 334.
\textsuperscript{49} For the notion of generations among Swedish value nihilists, see Strang, Johan (2009) ‘Two Generations of Scandinavian Legal Realists’. Retfærd, No. 1, 62–82. See also Strang’s chapter in this volume.
\textsuperscript{51} ‘As a consumer he belongs to a cooperative which keeps his household budget in line; as a worker he belongs to a trade union or a professional organization which helps to safeguard his income; as a liberal or a socialist or a conservative he is a member of a political party and participates to some degree in public life.’ Childs 1938, 34.
Despite the extent to which existence is organized, or even, perhaps, because of it, one has a strong sense of the independence of the individual. Whether individual liberties are jeopardized by the power of organized business, organized labor, or organized consumers is a matter of deep and constant concern. No other people in the world today seem so aware of the need not only to protect the ancient rights of man but to re-examine them realistically in the light of modern practice.\(^{52}\)

In particular, organized labour played the most crucial role in making anonymous mass society with all its dangers of mindless consumerism or the creation of a totalitarian cult of the leader into a truly democratic life form:

> It is a long way from the little man at the bottom to these men at the top [e.g., labor leaders] who are charged with so great a responsibility, leading nearly a million and a half workers in a period of grave uncertainty. But the little man has a voice and a vote and he may go as far as his energy and capacity will take him in the movement that is his own. This is a democracy, labor’s own democracy, directed by men from the ranks.\(^{53}\)

But unlike the impressed observers from abroad or the scientifically detached expert members of Swedish committees, whether inspired by value nihilism or not, ‘labor’s own democracy’ could not afford to take this supposed democratic proclivity for granted either in Swedish society as a whole, or among its own rank and file. Childs was particularly impressed by the intensive attention towards education, study and self-fulfilment which made up an integral part of the Swedish labour movement at the time.

Yet, the dual commitment to objectivity on the one hand and to democracy on the other could sometimes have interesting consequences for the foreign observer: For example, the head of the Arbetarrörelsens Bildningsförbund (ABF, ‘Workers’ Education Association’) in Kiruna, J. E. Westberg, a locomotive engineer in the mines and, according to Childs, ‘the highest type of trade-union leader’, stressed the effort made to ensure objectivity in the instruction given. When Childs asked ‘What of Nazism; will the Swedish trade unions go down before some such movement as they did in Germany?’, Westberg is said to have replied ‘in slow, careful English’, that ‘we hope that our people will be so well educated that they will never accept the word of one man’.\(^{54}\)

At the same time, the labour movement, just like any other organisation, had to develop its own methods for maintaining control and discipline within its own ranks. Democracy, after all, can only be exercised under responsibility. The moral and values of the emerging young new elite of the Swedish labour movement influenced the American understanding of

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52 Childs 1938, 34.
53 Childs 1938, 24.
54 Childs 1938, 135.
Swedish policy-making and its particular approach towards the problem of how to make democracy work in an increasingly complex and tension-ridden world.

At Brunsvik People’s College, closely associated with both the ABF and the main trade union, Sigfrid Hansson, the brother of the Prime Minister, experimented with a relaxed attitude towards control: ‘There is little or no external discipline. Rather, a kind of self-discipline is the ideal. This is expressed in a single rule of conduct: Altting är tillåtet som inte är dumt eller full.’ 55 ‘Translated freely’, Childs added, slightly erroneously, ‘this is: You are allowed to do anything you want to do except those things that might be considered stupid or silly.’ 56 This statement reflected the fact that the unions sent ‘their best men and women’ to Brunsvik, and the honour of not only the individual but also the honour of the union demanded that these young men and women shared a common knowledge of what was dumt eller full. 57

Planning and corporatism: political democracy and economic democracy

In Sweden, as well as in Norway and Denmark, labour governments had been in power since the early and mid-1930s. In Childs’ opinion, all the reforms – ‘old-age pensions, workmen’s compensation insurance, mass housing, state medicine, unemployment relief and public works’ – undertaken by the Social Democrat government of Sweden marked less an effort by a socialist party to socialise the country, than the effort of ‘democracy to adjust to the modern world’. 58 If there is any particular recommendation in terms of political democracy to be taken from the Swedish experience, it would be the ‘careful parliamentary course’ followed by the labour government mainly made up by the Social Democrats:

Subject to varied and conflicting pressures both from within the country and without, they must reconcile these forces and steer a careful parliamentary course. When to yield, when to stand firm, how much to surrender, what is worth a last ditch fight, these are questions that daily perplex labor ministers of the Scandinavian states. In a world increasingly given over to absolutism they seek to govern by reason, the democratic method, realizing all the time that a political democracy cannot continue to exist unless it is possible to achieve a larger measure of economic democracy. 59

55 Childs 1938, 106.
56 The Swedish word full would normally translate into English as ‘ugly’ rather than ‘silly’.
57 Childs 1938, 106.
58 Childs 1938, 65.
59 Childs 1938, 58.
The concept of ‘economic democracy’ could be used in this way to connect the programme of social reforms of the Swedish Social Democrats with political democracy, which was under threat across the globe. Social reforms towards greater economic and social equality eased the tension between capital and labour, improved the capacity of democratic government to deliver the goods, and at the same time reduced the potential support for totalitarian movements.

Tellingly, American interest in Sweden shifted during the late 1930s away from the concern with Swedish forms of industrial democracy, which preoccupied Childs, to the more concrete issues of social problems and their solution: housing policy, unemployment insurance, child care, crime prevention, population policy and family planning. In the spring of 1938, for example, *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* dedicated a special issue to the question of ‘Social Problems and Policies in Sweden’ which included articles from about twenty prominent Swedish social reformers and politicians, including Bertil Ohlin, Axel Höjer, Gunnar Myrdal, Alva Myrdal and Gustav Möller, among others.60 Here, issues of democracy played a minor role, the focus being on social problems and their practical treatment.

However, when Gunnar Myrdal was invited to hold the prestigious Godkin Lectures at Harvard University the same year, he chose *Population: A Problem for Democracy* as the theme of his talks, emphasizing the close connection between population policies, social policies and the survival of democracy.61 Later, Alva Myrdal developed this link further in her 1941 book *Nation and Family: The Swedish Experiment in Democratic Family and Population Policy*, where she described Nordic social policies and social planning – or ‘constructive social engineering’ as she called it – as an effective antidote to fascist tendencies.62 By guaranteeing a higher and more equal living standard as well as a minimum of security and public services, social policy could prevent aspiring totalitarians from finding support among impoverished workers and insecure middle classes. As such,

62 This linking of social policy with democracy was not unique to the Myrdals. A marked increase of books and reports on Sweden could be noted in the late 1930s, further establishing the notion that Sweden had become a frontrunner of modernity. Sweden also had ample opportunity to shape the American image of the country through the Delaware Tercentenary, 1638–1938, which, among other things, commemorated the 300 years which had passed since the founding of the short-lived Swedish colony New Sweden on the banks of the Delaware River as well as the 1939–1940 World Fair in New York. See Henriksson, Fritz (1939) *Sweden’s participation in the U.S. celebration of the New Sweden tercentenary*. Stockholm: Bonniers; Musiał, Kazimierz (2002) *Roots of the Scandinavian Model. Images of Progress in the Era of Modernisation*. Baden Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft.
Alva Myrdal suggested, it could even supply another reason for Germany to attack the Nordic countries, besides geopolitics and military strategy.\(^{55}\)

In some sense, Alva Myrdal was prescient in this opinion, as the Second World War would eventually cause a marked shift in the American association between Sweden and democracy: On the one hand, Sweden was the only Nordic country to escape the war.\(^{64}\) Hence, it remained a symbolic beacon of what had become known as the northern democracies in the preceding decade. On the other hand, the way in which Sweden managed to avoid war did promote a growing suspicion that Sweden’s dealings with the other northern democracies were neither shaped by neutrality, nor by solidarity, but rather by Realpolitik. By inference, questions about Swedish neutrality affected the perception of Swedish democracy, as the Allied press and propaganda strove to depict the world war in terms of a conflict between democracy on the one hand and dictatorship on the other.\(^{55}\)

To be sure, critical voices had been heard within Sweden and were sometimes reported abroad. For example, in a study commissioned by Britain’s New Fabian Research Bureau and published in 1939 under the title Democratic Sweden, Gösta Bagge, Conservative Party leader and professor at the Social Institute in Stockholm, claimed that the alliance between labour and capital and between farmers and workers – which foreign observers hailed as the foundation of Swedish democracy – in practice made the ‘present Government almost irremovable’ due to the control of the ‘Popular Front’ of farmers and workers of the Riksdag. Seen is this way, Sweden emerged as ‘a totalitarian state, as only the Government parties ruled the country; the principal difference between Sweden and Germany was that in Sweden criticisms of the Government could be made openly’.\(^{66}\) Bagge’s arguably exaggerated characterization can be linked to the need of the Swedish Conservatives in the late 1930s to disassociate themselves from fascism by accusing others of it, as many of the conservative youth had joined various fascist movements earlier in the 1930s.\(^ {57}\)

In any case, it is striking that it was primarily conservative thinkers who took an interest in the relationship between contemporary Swedish political culture and that of the emerging totalitarian states in Europe. In

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64 The possible exception is Iceland, depending on how British and American ‘occupation’ is defined.
65 This message was of course complicated by the British, French and US alliance with the Soviet Union.
67 The Comintern accusation that social democracy was ‘social fascism’ does not seem to have spurred a similar attempt to disassociate Swedish Social Democracy from Italian Fascism as the accusation primarily dealt with the conflict between Communists and Social Democrats within the labour movement. Yet, Italian appreciation of Sweden and the Social Democratic government in the mid-1930s did prove increasingly embarrassing as the decade came to a close. See Carlomagno, Marcos Cantera (1995) Ett folk av människlig granit: Sverige i den italienska strikspolitiken 1932–1936. Lund: Historiska Media.
a 1939 article in the American journal *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Gunnar Heckscher, at the time a political scientist at Uppsala University, described the Swedish system of organized group interests – the basis of Swedish democracy as praised by Childs and the British Fabians – as an attempt to ‘create equality of bargaining power’:

There is a certain resemblance between this system – the practice of which is by no means limited to Sweden – and the corporatism of Italy, and to some extent Germany. In both cases, individualism and *laissez-faire* have been abandoned as guiding political principles.68

Furthermore, the relationship between individuals – ‘the people’ – and the government is indirect and mediated by organized interest groups. But there is a vast difference, Heckscher noted, which prevented him from repeating Bagge’s ostentatious claim:

In Italy, these organizations were created by the state, after the spontaneous group organizations had been crushed; and the new groups only have a very limited amount of self-government. In Sweden, on the other hand, the state has taken advantage of spontaneous associations, built on a democratic basis, and is enlisting their independent cooperation.69

Both may be called ‘corporatism’ and/or ‘corporativism’.70 But in Sweden it was not a result of dictatorial, hardly even legislative, action. And while these ‘genuine, spontaneously organized groups’ were characterized by their independence of governmental authorities, ‘even if they were subject to normal police regulations, and even, as in Sweden, sometimes made to act in the interests of the government’, the ‘State-created corporations’ in Italy and Germany were ‘not permitted any real autonomy at all’.71 Hence spontaneity was the fundamental difference between Italian Fascism and Swedish organised society, and Sweden was to be understood as characterised by an essentially ‘free corporativism’.72

Two years later, Heckscher returned to the topic in an article together with the American scholar James J. Robbins. Now, however – as the world war was raging – Heckscher characterised the Swedish solution to the conflict between labour and capital as fundamentally liberal and decidedly democratic, and hence clearly distinct from either the German or Italian experience.

69 Heckscher 1939, 130–135.
70 Heckscher’s usage of this concept seems to have been somewhat indecisive on this point, using both forms interchangeably, as did many of his contemporaries.
72 Heckscher 1939, 130–135.
...it is well known that the uncontrolled, and apparently uncontrollable, battles between organized labor and organized capital had something to do with the emergence of Fascism in Italy as well as the financing of Nazism in Germany. The experiences of countries like Great Britain and Sweden have been of another kind. There, the representatives of capital and labor have not proved unwilling to assist the State in controlling their disputes, and the organizations of farmers have been made use of as agencies of the State in controlling the output of foodstuffs in circumstances of national danger.\(^3\)

In fact, the Swedish experience showed to Robbins and Heckscher that constitutional, ‘liberal’ and hence democratic regimes were not ‘as incompetent to meet the new situation presented by organised groups, as the totalitarians have argued’.\(^4\) This observation motivated the Swede and the American to ask:

Does “corporatism” offer a way out by providing a middle course between totalitarianism and rank individualism? The totalitarian dictatorships themselves make a great show of corporatism, particularly in the constitutional field, where functional representation of some kind is often used as a substitute for what is known elsewhere as representation of the people. Does such a solution avoid the absolutist qualities of the totalitarian approach, and provide a solution to the problem of organized groups?\(^5\)

Heckscher and Robbins concluded that a new sort of free corporatism was in the making within ‘our own society’ – that is, in both the USA and in Sweden:

a corporatism in which autonomous groups, grown to maturity from below, and not thrown together by some dictatorial architect overnight, share with the government of the State, openly and constitutionally, the function of promoting the interests of the community in all their variegated aspects. Perhaps such a functional government will survive long after the new Paganisms [T. S. Eliot’s terms for Fascism and Nazism] have passed from the scene.\(^6\)

Prescient as this may sound – predating Gunnar Adler-Karlsson’s discussions on ‘functional socialism’ in the 1960s and Bo Rothstein’s analysis of Swedish ‘neo-corporatism’ in the 1980s\(^7\) — Heckscher’s wartime analysis of Sweden

\(^3\) Robbins & Heckscher 1941, 16.
\(^4\) Robbins & Heckscher 1941, 16.
\(^5\) Robbins & Heckscher 1941, 22.
\(^6\) Robbins & Heckscher 1941, 26.
in terms of free corporativism also signalled a shift in the understanding of Swedish democracy: Turning away from industrial democracy – which could be negatively associated with corporatism and with the anti-democratic practices of, above all, Italian Fascism – to an emphasis of technical prowess, social progressiveness and social reforms as well as neutrality, Sweden was increasingly associated with economic democracy, planning democracy and social democracy. It is in this context that we should read the varied efforts to maintain or repair the link between Swedish nationhood and the concept of democracy which took place during and just after the Second World War, with an Anglo-American world market in mind.

Conclusion

In the international appreciation of the Nordic countries during the interwar era, it was primarily the alleged capacity of the Nordic countries to transcend the disruptive tensions of modernity which elsewhere brought forth a crisis of democracy which provided the most central theme. American interest in the Swedish experience of democracy primarily pivoted around the way in which this Nordic country seemed to have bridged the various opposites of ‘industrial civilization’. The most notable such oppositions concerned conflicts between old and new, tradition and modernity, large and small, city and country and – most centrally – capital and labour.

The fact that these tensions appeared to put a fatal strain on democracy elsewhere made the survival of political democracy in the Nordic countries throughout the 1930s (and in the case of Sweden throughout the Second World War) valuable in its own right. But political democracy survived the onslaught of crisis and war elsewhere, too. The casual, yet cautious way in which these tensions seemed to be accepted instead of fought against or denied in the Nordic countries made the Nordics special from the American horizon. The moderate and sober manner in which this bridging between old and new took place was frequently taken as evidence of the profoundly democratic nature of these societies. In this context, the democracy of the Nordic countries implied a sensitivity to differing opinions as well as a willingness to accommodate the ends of modernity with the means of tradition, and vice versa.79


79 It is interesting that the predominantly critical historiography on the Swedish folkhem which has dominated Swedish history-writing on this epoch from the late 1980s and early 1990s onwards pinpoints the unwillingness of the radical ‘reform coalitions’ to take tradition and the old into account and to remake society totally anew. While this type of radicalism is indeed represented in the writings of many Swedish reformers of the time, the practical reforms within housing, child care, etcetera are frequently combinations of new and old.
The opposition between modernity and tradition also contained a critical tension between small and large as modernity was strongly associated with mega-cities, mass society and mass production. In short, the triumph of large-scale social organization over smaller forms of social life such as the family, the farm, the village and the parish embodied the victory of the power of modernity over the power of tradition. American discourses on modernity and American civilization had long hailed the virtues of large-scale organization. Yet, the rapid social change and increasingly frequent economic crises of the late 1800s and early 1900s also led American observers to look upon community and tradition as a necessity for democracy. As a consequence, many American debaters in the early 1900s were seriously concerned with the issue of how to defend Smalltown America against Big Industry and/or Big Government as well as how to combine the benefits of large-scale modernity with the values of small-scale tradition.

Here, small-scale Scandinavian societies could be used to showcase that smallness and tradition need not stand in opposition to large-scale modernisation. The Swedish example showed how prosperity, peace and democracy are interdependent upon each other. The broader policy pursued by the labour movement, including farmers as well as workers, the middle class as well as the working class, employers as well as employees answered the need not only to overcome conflict in modernity, but also to underline the fundamental interdependence between various social interests and groups in modern society. As a consequence, the true test of democracy, its benefits as well as its drawbacks, did not primarily lie in the formal doctrine of political democracy – of participation and representativity, which totalitarians may anyway bypass and then abuse for their own purposes – but in the actual practices of deliberation and in the culture of mutual respect of opposed interests which eventually results from this practice.

What kind of democracy was then conceptualised as being Nordic? Which different dimensions of democracy were over the course of time associated with Sweden? For one thing, the association shifted from the initial geopolitical notion in the early 1930s of the northern democracies to the observation that these northern democracies also happened to be smaller democracies. Childs played a pivotal role in the late 1930s in establishing the notion that these smaller, northern democracies were particularly well suited to bolster democracy in view of the fascist challenge, precisely because of their smallness and their Nordic identity.

In particular Sweden exhibited a special form of industrial democracy – a dimension of democracy which, strictly speaking, had remained an unrealised ideal elsewhere. Swedish industrial democracy was the result of a combination of effort on the part of the labour movement towards cooperating and coordinating an already highly organised society and would not have worked had it not been for the successful broadening of the labour


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movement to include farmer interests and middle class interests — exactly what the labour movement had failed to do in those European states where fascism and authoritarianism had emerged triumphant.

While the features of Swedish society which allowed for this remarkable development to take place may very well have been unique, there were elements of strategy and conscious effort which could be emulated elsewhere. First, the Swedish logic of bargaining was presented as operating less through shared values than through shared fears. Having identified what was needed to combat the crisis (an alliance between labour and capital) as well as fascism (a broader labour movement), the obstacles to both this broader labour movement and an alliance between labour and capital could be isolated: jealousy and competing interests between city and country, capital and labour, and between the middle class and working class. Now, shared fears could be turned into shared values. By identifying common ground in shared understandings of minimum needs, standards of living and ‘decenty’, through the workings of parliamentary expert committees, a relative consensus on the shape of future social policy could be worked out.\(^8\) Once the wider goals had been set, the detailed drafting of reforms could be left to technical experts and the final implementation handed over to administrative bureaucrats, in what appears to be a textbook illustration of the Myrdalian conception of ‘social engineering’, which both Alva Myrdal and Gunnar Myrdal later sought to propagate in an American context.\(^8\)

The broad alliance between farmers and workers as well as other organised group interests worked as the basis for a purposive democracy which could combat economic as well as political crises and hence ensure the survival of democracy. At the same time, however, the very success of this alliance as well as its reliance upon organised group interests could also be construed as a pseudo-fascist form of corporatism. The demand to deliver on ‘democracy as promise’ could be pitted against the need to safeguard ‘democracy as process’ with its constant deliberation between majority and minority opinions and interests.\(^3\) Heckscher’s notions of free corporativism and, later, pluralist democracy were tasked with explaining the difference between Swedish democratic corporatism and German and Italian unfree corporatism.

In Sweden, the combination of the concept of ‘democracy’ with the concept of ‘Nordic’ signalled a particular sense of community, identity

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81 It is noteworthy that Childs, in his description of this process — which probably was not as much a result of ‘political acumen’ and strategy as Childs chose to depict it — failed to mention the importance of the Swedish fear of population decline, shared by many Swedes both Left and Right during the mid-1930s but of marginal concern to most Americans at the time. Childs 1938, 101.


and solidarity in and among the Nordic countries. This community was not only formulated in the face of present geopolitical dangers resulting from the rise of totalitarianism in the vicinity of Norden and the potential internal repercussions of these tensions within Norden. To some extent, this conceptual combination of Nordicity with democracy relied upon the notion of a specific Nordic culture as the basis of this political form. Indeed, both foreign and Nordic accounts of the success of Nordic democracy during the 1930s often underlined the importance of homogeneity and continuity in the population for peaceful progressivism.

Hence, the notion of democracy in its Nordic formulation worked first as a means by which to de-dramatize the democratization process in its opposition to the economic, political and social order of the past and its representatives (who also relied upon the notion of a culturally specific Nordicity as the basis for their conservative political programme). Second, it also turned against the ideal of a Nordic community based on race as propagated by contemporary fascists in the Nordic countries. Third, it fitted nicely with the fundamental tenets of legal realism and value nihilism, largely accepting democracy as a given political preference of the Nordic peoples, shared by most if not all.

American references to Sweden and democracy – appreciative as well as critical ones – appear to have been less concerned with the survival of political democracy in Sweden than with the notion that industrial democracy could be created to solve some of the pressing tensions of modernity. Later, this image was supplanted with the notion that Sweden exhibited a specific form of planning democracy where planning was undertaken in order to strengthen democracy not weaken it.

Here, it is principled bargaining between capital and labour on the one hand and between labour and farmers on the other, combined with the parliamentary sanctioned and scientifically authorized study of actual and changing living standards which provides a living test of how to make democracy work – through the active shaping of values which may not have been initially shared by all.

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84 For a more detailed discussion of this argument, see Marklund, Carl & Stadius, Peter (forthcoming), ‘Accept and Conform: Culture Unbound.’


