This is the published version of a chapter published in *Multi-layered Historicity of the Present: Approaches to social science history*.

Citation for the original published chapter:

Edling, N. (2013)
The Primacy of Welfare Politics: Notes on the language of the Swedish Social Democrats and their adversaries in the 1930s.
In: Heidi Haggrén, Johanna Rainio-Niemi, Jussi Vauhkonen (ed.), *Multi-layered Historicity of the Present: Approaches to social science history* (pp. 125-150). Helsinki: University of Helsinki

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published chapter.

Permanent link to this version:
http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:diva-92683
Multi-layered Historicity of the Present

Approaches to social science history

Edited by
Heidi Haggrén, Johanna Rainio-Niemi,
and Jussi Vauhkonen

HELSINKI 2013
# CONTENTS

7 List of contributors
8 Tabula gratulatoria
10 Acknowledgements
11 To Pauli!

13 Towards historical social science / The making of Pauli Kettunen's dissertation Poliittinen liike ja sosiaalinen kollektiivisuus (1986) / **SEppo HENTILÄ**

33 The Nordic and gendering dimensions of labour history in Finland / **Pirjo Markkola**

47 Pauli Kettunen, history, and sociology / **Risto Alapuro**

61 Raoul Palmgren and the East and West of the Finnish Left / **Ilkka Liikanen**

75 Notes on the theory of nationalism / **Jussi Pakkasvirta**

93 A Nordic conceptual universe / **Henriksen**

105 The Danish social reform of 1933 / Social rights as a new paradigm by an accidental reform? / **Klaus Petersen, Niels Finn Christiansen and Jørn Henrik Petersen**

125 The primacy of welfare politics. / Notes on the language of the Swedish Social Democrats and their adversaries in the 1930s / **Nils Edling**

151 So many roads and nowhere to go. / How the Swedish Social Democrats are losing the battle about the Nordic model. / **Urban Lundberg and Klas Ämark**

171 A manager and his professionals. / Planning and constructing the modern firm in Finland, 1920s–1940s / **Susanna Fellman**

189 Private entrepreneurship and the state. / Discursive power struggles during the regulated economy 1939–1949 / **Kari Teras**

215 Knowledge and skills as national capital / Industrial modernization, nationalism and the failure of Asea-Strömberg 1962–64 / **Juhana Aunesluoma**

233 Work and welfare. / A comparison of Swedish and British shipbuilding industry in the context of economic downturn / **Steven Gascoigne and Noel Whiteside**

247 The 1890–1910 crisis of Australian capitalism and the social democratic response / Was the Australian model a pioneering regime of Social Democratic Welfare Capitalist regulation? / **Christopher Lloyd**

271 Narratives and numbers. / Politics in the making of sickness insurance in Finland / **Olli Kangas, Mikko Niemelä and Sampo Varjonen**

297 Comparison, measurement, and economization. / The origin of the retirement age of 65 in Finland / **Matti Hannikainen**
Decline of civil servant privilege. / A new look at the historical development of Finnish social policy / TAPIO BERGĦOLM

Basic income and democracy / JORMA KALELA

Finnish central government administration views on welfare service reform / Advancing the social investment paradigm? / HELENA BLOMBERG-KROLL

Economizing the reluctant welfare state / New rationales for child care in the United States in the 21st century / SONYA MICHEL
THE PRIMACY OF WELFARE POLITICS
Notes on the language of the Swedish Social Democrats and their adversaries in the 1930s

NILS EDLING

The 1930s are usually highlighted as the formative moment in modern Swedish history; weak governments, high unemployment rates and many industrial conflicts prior to that decisive decade — strong governments, welfare reforms and harmonious relations between capital and labour after it.¹ On 27 May 1933, the Social Democrats (Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Arbetarparti) and the Farmers’ Party (Bondeförbundet) signed the crisis agreement, and it was followed five years later by the second step, the Saltsjöbaden-agreement between employers and unions concerning the rules that were to govern labour market relations. These are the two formative events, the foundation of the Swedish historical class compromise, to use Walter Korpi’s well-known label.² The decade also saw the rise of corporatism and, of course, the beginning of a new era in Swedish politics with the Social Democrats in power from 1932 to 1976, almost without interruption but not always in majority.³ These changes turned out to have an epochal character; the 1930s saw the birth of modern Sweden, of the virtuous circle with its long-lived societal compromises connecting economic growth, politics and ethics.⁴ Notwithstanding Sweden’s

¹ This text is an early report from the research project ‘The Struggle over the Welfare State: A History of the Welfare Concepts in Sweden 1850–2010’ funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, the Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation (grant P12-0269:1). I would like to thank my colleagues Nikolas Glover, Urban Lundberg and Klas Åmark for comments, discussions and suggestions. See also note 9.


speedy recovery from the depression and the immediate international attention it attracted, the long-term consequences were of course unknown to contemporaries.

The crisis agreement from 1933 secured parliamentary support for an expansionist economic policy with an under-balanced budget in order to combat unemployment through public investments and for special regulations to secure production prices and incomes in agriculture. This vitally important political compromise between two former adversaries was immediately and disparagingly labelled the horse-trade, kohandel (literary translated the cow-trade). This name followed that of the Danish crisis agreement, from January the same year, which critical Danes named the ox-trade, studehandel. The agreement's importance for parliamentary democracy and the general political climate must be underlined. However, the Social Democratic minority government under Per Albin Hansson's leadership failed to make the unemployment insurance part of the package in 1933, and the voluntary insurance legislation was passed through the Riksdag the following year with support from the Liberals – a dozen liberal MPs had in fact deserted the party line and supported the crisis agreement. In 1934, the farmers joined the Conservative opposition and said no to unemployment provision, and the new economic and social reforms were subjected to heavy fire from conservative and liberal camps.

The present study deals with the central concepts in Swedish political discourse in the 1930s, particularly with the language of economic and social reform. It has an overtly polemical thrust and sets out to challenge and correct the now widespread and well-established interpretation which says that 'the people's home', folkhemmet, is the key concept in modern Swedish history. My contention is that it actually had a rather limited immediate significance compared to the contested, but forgotten, key concept of the 1930s: welfare politics, välfärdspolitik. 'The people's home's' elevated status as the core concept is to a large extent a presentist construction with relatively weak historical foundations. That is the strong challenge put forward in this text.

5 My approach can be labelled pragmatic nominalism, which means that my searchlight is set on the terms that were used. Which were those terms? How were they used and what did they mean? And who used them? Such questions guide my search. In other words, this is not a text about welfare ideas and ideologies in general. For the sake of simplicity, I will in this text use term and concept interchangeably when referring to folkhemmet, 'the people's home', and välfärdspolitik, welfare politics.

The limited significance of *folkhemmet*

It is customarily argued that the new policies forwarded by the Social Democrats in the 1930s were centred on the concept of *folkhem* (definite form: *folkhemmet*], home for the people/the people’s home. Consequently, runs the argument, this must be the key concept in modern Swedish politics. The weak claim that the term *folkhem* was used relatively frequently from the 1930s and on is certainly correct, but probably not in the sense intended by those who reproduce it. A stronger and more interesting assertion states that it was a key concept for the Social Democrats and that it guided Swedish politics in general. Unfortunately, that claim has been repeated so often over the last decades that it is now taken for granted despite the lack of systematic studies, and it is symptomatic that the ambitious *Oxford Handbook of the Welfare State* reiterates the historically incorrect claim that ‘welfare state’ and ‘folkhem’ are interchangeable terms.\(^7\) In a similar way, German studies have set up *folkhemmet* as the organising principle of Swedish welfare society, the *Ordnungsmodell* of the last century.\(^8\) The Swedish examples are too many to list, *folkhemmet* is to be found everywhere and its popularity seems to be rising.

Nevertheless I contend, well aware that I am fighting an uphill battle, it is actually the case that the popularity of *folkhemmet* is of recent origin.\(^9\) A simple search in the national research library catalogue indicates this quiet clearly: up to 1980 *folkhem* appeared 67 times in total in the titles of Swedish publications. From the 1980s onwards, we see a continuous growth with more

---


9 For a more extensive discussion of the term’s history in the 20th century with examples of the changing meanings attached to it, see Edling, Nils & Lundberg, Urban (forthcoming) ‘Folkhemsmyten i svensk historisk forskning’.

127
than 500 hits up to date.\textsuperscript{10} This growth coincides with the fiscal crisis of the welfare state, the murder of Olof Palme and neo-liberal calls for a 'system change' (\textit{systemskifte}) in the 1980s. In this era, the concept of \textit{folkhemmet} was recovered and consciously deployed by Social Democrats to describe the good society which they were defending against all the hostile attackers. The Social Democrats did not, this must be underlined, use the concept actively in any systematic way before the 1980s; it was at that time rescued from history and reintroduced in books like \textit{Folkhemsmodellen} from 1984, an explanation of the virtues and achievements of the Social Democrats' labour market and social policies, and pamphlets contrasting the present welfare state, now baptised \textit{folkhemmet}, with the dangerous neo-liberal alternatives.\textsuperscript{11}

It was in this context \textit{folkhemmet} became popular as a metaphor for the Social Democratic welfare state, a metaphor impregnated with nostalgia looking back at the lost Golden Age of Welfare.\textsuperscript{12} Tellingly, the Swedish Social Democrats themselves made programmatic use of the concept for the first time ever in 1990 in the background which described the labour movement's historic mission and the need to defend the inclusive and general welfare reforms against neo-liberals at home or bureaucrats in Brussels.\textsuperscript{13}

Nowadays, \textit{folkhemmet} is used indiscriminately in all kinds of popular and scholarly discourses. It is a fuzzy concept with multiple connotations and it can be easily stamped on anything and everything. In my view historians and social scientists are largely responsible for this through their persistent and uncritical promotion of the concept. In other words, \textit{folkhemmet} has been established as a key concept through collective efforts from the 1980s onwards; it moved quite swiftly from politics into academia where it was

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} This search in Libris, \url{http://libris.kb.se/}, includes books, articles and posters and doesn't take multiple editions into account. Consequently, the total number of unique hits might be slightly lower. However, the search omits all the numerous \textit{folkhem}-compounds, such as \textit{folkhemssverige}, \textit{folkhemspolitik} or \textit{folkhemsmodell} etc. The online catalogue was accessed 4 October 2012.
\item \textsuperscript{13} Swedish Social Democrats' party programme 1990, 6–7. This and many other Swedish party programmes and election platforms are available online, see Svenska partiprogram och valmanifest 1887–2010, Svensk Nationell Datatjänst, \url{http://snd.gu.se/sv/vivill} (accessed 11 October 2012).
\end{itemize}
warmly welcomed.14 Apart from the overtly political use of *folkhemmet* as a nostalgic reference to a lost golden age and the perceived need to guard previous achievements in a politically more hostile environment, the new scholarly interest in discourses and concepts and their historical significance propelled the study of that strange term, the compound noun of people (*folk*) and home (*hem*). This interest in language as an object of historical inquiry in itself and the apparent urge to give a fitting name to an important period in modern Swedish history – yet chronologically speaking a very flexible one since the concept has been set to cover anything from a few decades to the entire century – help explain the proliferation of *folkhem*–studies. Most of them just make use of ‘the people’s home’ as an unspecified yet familiar frame of reference, a few put forward arguments about the concept’s fundamental significance and these studies are of course of primary interest here. It is possible to discern three overlapping claims in these studies: a) *folkhemmet* is a vitally important concept in modern Swedish history; b) the Social Democrats had to fight to take control of this contested concept; c) the concept rapidly became very popular in the social democratic version.

Beginning with the last claim, any argument about the concept’s instant popularity takes as the given starting point the parliamentary debate in early 1928 when acting Social Democratic party leader Per Albin Hansson, in passing but not by accident, tried out the metaphor *folkhemmet*. In this speech, one of the most quoted in modern Swedish history, Hansson made it clear that the good home, characterized by community and inclusion as well as equality, consideration, co-operation and helpfulness, could not accept any privileged or neglected members. The Swedish society of his day was a brutal negation of those ideals:

*Applied to the great people’s and citizens’ home this would mean the breaking down of all the social and economic barriers that now separate citizens into the privileged and the neglected, into the rulers and the dependents, into the rich and the poor, the propertied and the impoverished, the plunderers and the plundered. Swedish society is not yet the*

---

14 Yes, I contributed too; with the closing remark in my first book I wanted to underline that the use of the home (*hemmet*) as a metaphor for the good society and national integration was well established in Swedish political discourse before the 1930s, Edling, Nils (1996) *Det fosterländska hemmet. Egnahemspolitik, småbruk och hemideologi kring sekelskiftet 1900*. Stockholm: Carlsson, 383–385.
people’s home. There is formal equality, equality of political rights, but from a social perspective, the class society remains and from an economic perspective the dictatorship of the few prevails.\textsuperscript{15}

According to many researchers, Hansson’s people’s home-speech captures the essence of Social Democratic reformism and that might be a valid interpretation. Generally speaking, these studies focus on the ideas and policies and make use of ‘the people’s home model’ to catch certain characteristics of Swedish social democratic reformism.\textsuperscript{16} However, it must be remembered that the Social Democrats themselves hardly ever used \textit{folkhemmet} to describe and promote their objectives. Although it can be seen as a welfare concept of a kind, it was not synonymous with ‘the welfare state’, and certainly not contested in that way. For Hansson \textit{folkhemmet} was clearly a future-oriented welfare concept but not the most important tool in his rhetorical repertoire; he used ‘the people’s and citizen’s home’ (\textit{folk- och medborgarhemmet}) or simply ‘the citizen’s home’ (\textit{medborgarhemmet}) more often.\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, Hansson was the only leading party representative who talked about ‘the people’s home’; his prominent colleagues Ernst Wigforss, Minister of Finance 1932–1936 and 1936–1949, and Gustav Möller, Minister of Social Affairs 1924–1926, 1932–1936, 1936–1938 and 1939–1951, never spoke about \textit{folkhemmet}, and later party leaders Tage Erlander and Olof Palme only mentioned it when referring to Hansson’s times or to Sweden in general. In \textit{Tiden}, the party’s


journal for political and cultural debate, *folkhemmet* appeared a meagre seven times 1928–1940, this in the years when, according to modern interpretations, it permeated and directed Social Democratic ideology and practice.\(^{18}\) The two volume study of the ideological development of the Social Democrats from 1941 by Professor Herbert Tingsten, a prominent political scientist and at that time an active party member, confirms this picture: Tingsten, a truly well-informed insider, devoted only a couple of lines out of 900 pages to the concept of *folkhemmet*.\(^{19}\) Three years later, the party congress devoted several days and 600 pages to the new principal programme and the reform agenda for the coming years and *folkhem* popped up only twice in these lengthy and detailed discussions.\(^{20}\) As noted, the concept made its debut in the party programme as late as in 1990 and it cannot be found in a single Social Democratic national programme, election platform or poster before that year.\(^{21}\) This discrepancy between the historical actors’ lack of interest in the concept and the current fascination is rather surprising – Hansson obviously lacked a spin doctor with a feeling for what today’s scholars and politicians appreciate. My conclusion is that any argument stating that *folkhemmet* was a central slogan or core concept for the Social Democrats over time must be taken with a pinch of salt or two, and it is, I believe, necessary to make a clearer distinction between the use of ‘people’s home’ as an analytical concept introduced *post festum* and the claim that *folkhem* held a central position in the sources and processes studied.

As for claims a) and b), the assertion that ‘the people’s home’ became popular early in the 1930s remains unsubstantiated. The logic of reasoning seems to go something like this: *folkhemmet* was central to the Social Democrats, their party won popular support in the elections and was in


\(^{20}\) *Protokoll Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetarepartis 17:e kongress i Konserthusets stora sal. Stockholm, den 18–24 maj 1944*, Stockholm: Sveriges Socialdemokratiska arbetareparti, 11 (P. A. Hansson), 71 (G. Branting). Just to avoid any misunderstanding: *folkhemmet* was used four times at the congress in 1928 (two of these were in Hansson’s welcome speech); not a single time, it seems, at the congresses in 1932 and 1936; two times at the congress in 1940. This conclusion is based on the copies I have made for my research project of the relevant parts of the volumes. Of course, there might be references to *folkhem* in the parts that I have excluded, but I doubt it.

\(^{21}\) This conclusion is based on a search in the online database *Svenska partiprogram och valmanifest 1887–2010* at Svensk Nationell Datatjänst, http://snd.gu.se/sv/vivill (accessed 11 October 2012).
government, and consequently, the concept must be both important and widespread in Sweden. As indicated here, the first premise lacks firm empirical anchorage and this of course damages the argument in general. Yes, there are several good studies of the meandering prehistory of the concept from the last decades of the nineteenth century to the 1930s; the term was first used for settlement houses (cf. German Volksheim) and became politicised after the break-up of the union with Norway in 1905 – the infrequently used metaphor folkhemmet symbolised the nation and national unity. But these works are all based on the questionable premise that ‘the people’s home’ became the key concept in Swedish politics from the 1930s onwards. That is the main problem, in my view. The antidote whenever claims are made that folkhemmet was ‘the central organizing slogan of the Social Democrats’ or that ‘the struggle over the concept “folkhemmet” became synonymous with the struggle over governmental power’ is to check the references provided – if you can find any – and then ask for an explanation of exactly how the metaphor was transformed into a political programme. Numerous texts feed the message that ‘the people’s home’ became a popular slogan, the Social Democrats’ ‘mantra’ (Witoszek), a widely spread metaphor popularised by the social democrats (Stråth), a metaphor that Hansson introduced and made common in Swedish political discourse (Henze) or, even worse, the metaphor


transposed into some kind of blueprint: ‘Following Hansson’s speech, the idea of the “folkhem” became the main organizing principle of the Swedish welfare state’ (Schall). These claims confuse centrality and popularity. If the Swedish welfare state is the direct realization of Hansson’s metaphor about community and belonging, as the centrality-argument runs, then this process, the transformation of the metaphor into a full-scale reform agenda – which used other concepts – needs to be explained, instead of being taken for granted. As a matter of fact, neither the Social Democrats, apart from Hansson, nor the non-socialist opposition were particularly keen on talking about folkhemmet. So it seems, at least judging from the speeches made by the party leaders and from the election pamphlets and handbooks issued by the competing parties. In my view, this is important and affects the strongest claims made in the literature about the continued contestation surrounding the concept. Lars Trägårdh, the historian who has most ardently promoted the idea of folkhem as the contested key concept to the international public, confuses the mixed historical roots of the concept with contestation; that more or less prominent liberal, and conservative writers and politicians had made use of the term before 1914 and even in the 1920s does not in itself support the claim that P. A. Hansson had to fight in order to appropriate the concept. The simple truth is that the Social Democrats two main adversaries in the 1930s, the Conservative (Högern) and the Liberal (Folkpartiet) parties lacked any greater interest in folkhemmet; they occasionally made fun of Hansson’s new metaphor but refrained from any attempts to conquer it. Admiral Lindman, the Conservative leader, made sarcastic remarks and his successor Professor Gösta Bagge in a similar way repeated that the ideas of a national community and togetherness were attractive if one could trust the socialists. But that was of course completely out of the question as the Social Democrats favoured a planned economy and social reforms that undermined individual responsibility: ‘If the Social Democrats are allowed to stay in power, it is much to be feared that Mr Per Albin Hansson’s “folkhem” becomes the institution

---


25 Trägårdh 2002a, 146; Trägårdh 2002b, 84–85. He makes the same claim in both texts stating that the Conservatives made unsuccessful attempts ‘to establish a right-wing reading of the folkhem slogan’ in the 1920s and 1930s. However, the footnote refers to the critique P. A. Hansson received from a fellow Social Democrat. Much can be said about Arthur Engberg, one of Hansson’s adversaries within the party, but he was not a right-wing propagandist. Consequently, ‘the attempts’ remain unknown.
of all institutions.’ According to Bagge, his socialist opponent subscribed to ‘the ideals of medieval times and stagnation’. The Liberals were even less interested, it seems. As Norbert Götz indicates in the best researched study, *folkhemmet* was not very widely used in political debates in the 1930s and only the small parties on opposing flanks, the Communists and the different right wing groups, got really excited and launched harsh critiques. The major parties had other priorities and more pressing issues to deal with and their lack of interest lead to a rapid de-politicization of Hansson’s metaphor. This de-politicised and non-contested concept of *folkhemmet* became quite popular already in the 1930s and it appeared in commercials, illustrated weeklies and cartoons as the non-controversial metaphor for Sweden or Swedish society in general, ‘the people’s home which belongs to us all’. It became a broad national ‘flagging’ metaphor, and had little, if any, import on the social reforms of the 1930s and 1940s. As the leading literary critic Ivar Harrie stated in April 1940: ‘The term “folkhemmet” is nowadays used mostly with a rallying tone – a discarded term from propaganda which is used as a boomerang.’ According to him, it was a dead term without any real connotations and he wanted to revive it in order to defend the democratic ideals, the rule of law

---


28 Götz 2001, 245–252; also Björck 2011, 390–393. It is possible that further studies of the newspapers might alter my conclusion as far as the press is concerned.

and the Swedish nation in dark times. His aspirations were not fulfilled, it seems. Despite the surge of nationalist sentiments during the war years, 'the people's home' did not become the preferred way to describe the Swedish way of life and its central democratic values.

The importance of folk

The many studies of the concept of folkhem have successfully highlighted folk, the people, as a key concept in Swedish politics. Without a doubt, Tomas Jonsson, Trägårdh and others have made important contributions by uncovering the different historical meanings attached to folket. Focus has been on the Social Democrats and their ideological change where the entire national community (the people, folket) replaced the working-class as the focal group for social reforms. This new national orientation was clearly a fundamental change in socialist reformist ideology and political practice, and vitally important for the subsequent and repeated electoral successes, that well-known trademark of the Swedish Social Democrats from the 1930s to the 1970s. Party leader Hansson was instrumental in orchestrating and directing this transformation from class to nation – 'he explicitly embraced the notion that the party must project itself as a party of the people, so as not to be trapped within the exclusionary and adversarial language of class and class-struggle.'

This was Hansson’s strategy from the early 1920s and he regularly referred to

30 Harrie, Ivar (1944) In i fyrtiotalet. Stockholm: Gebers, 26-27, 242-249 (written 1940 and 1941), quotation from 26, a text dated 10 April 1940, the day after the Nazi invasion of Denmark and Norway. Other examples from literary criticism in the 1930s and 1940s show how folkhemmet lacked an explicit political content and was used as a metaphor for contemporary Swedish society in general, cf. Blomberg, Erik (1940) Mosaik. Litteratur, teater, konst etc. 1930-1940. Stockholm: Tiden, 149; Strindberg, Axel (1941) Människor mellan krig. Några kapitel i mellankrigssituationen. Stockholm: Kooperativa förbundets bokförlag, 369-429.

31 This is largely an educated guess on my part and the topic is well worth further inquiry. A single reference to folkhemmet can be found in the collection of essays in Svenska folkets väsenskärna (The Essence of the Swedish Nation) from 1940 and it is missing in the classic piece of propaganda from 1942-1943, the correspondence course Den svenska livsformen (The Swedish Way of Life). Folkhemmet is also completely absent in the edited volumes Socialismen och friheten. En orieterande debatt from 1942 and from Bonow et al, Svensk ordning och nyordning (Swedish Order and New Order) from 1943, where a handful leading Social Democrats contributed. Moreover, folkhemmet is not a theme in a contemporary study of the political commentary in Swedish literature, Mjöberg, Jöran (1944) Dikt och diktatur. Svenskt kulturförsvar 1933-1943. Stockholm: Natur & Kultur.


33 Trägårdh 2002b, 82-83.
his party's patriotism and the national message became even more important after the electoral defeat in 1928, the event that propelled the reformation in the coming years. The changes from 1928–1932 meant that the party finally took control over the Swedish Trade Union Confederation (Landsorganisationen) and made the exclusion and isolation of the communists a central objective for the unified reformist labour movement. Anti-Communism and watered down demands for socialist changes combined with the new emphasis on national community – *folket* understood as both ethnus and demos in changing and complex ways – set the tone of the new Social Democrats and their political reform programme. Hansson’s democratic nationalist socialism and the ways in which he linked democracy, national community and welfare reforms to each other provide the background, an explanation of a kind, for the present fixation on *folkhemmet* as the unifying and nation building key concept in the history of the Swedish welfare state. The analyses of Hansson’s brand of socialist reformism, with its stress on national co-operation and inclusive reforms, make several good points. Their problematic aspect is the exaggerated explanatory power invested in that single metaphor.

The one-sidedness in the *folk*-interpretation is also slightly problematic as it paves the way for simplifications. Bo Stråth, mainly following Trägårdh, argues that the Social Democrats conquered the concept of *folk* from the Conservatives after a protracted discursive struggle and he also indicates that the reunited liberals – the two Liberal parties joined forces in 1934 – decided on a new name, *Folkpartiet*, the People’s Party – as a consequence of the Social Democratic success. Both claims can be questioned. In my view, it is hard to argue that the Conservatives actually owned the concept of the people, *folket*, in the beginning of the twentieth century. The concept of the people, understood either as the entire population, the classes of lesser means (as opposed to the elite) or as the electorate, was open for contestation and appropriation from the late nineteenth century onwards and all parties did their best to claim ownership. It was the nation, the fatherland, *fosterlandet*, that the Conservatives claimed exclusive ownership to. The general point is of course that the Social Democrats’ *folkish-national* turn disarmed the standing critique from primarily the Conservative camp that the labour movement was anti-national and represented a mere class interest whereas

---


35 Cf. note 16.

the Conservatives looked after the national interest, all of the people.37 In the 
1930s, the Conservatives continued to hammer out the message that the Social 
Democrats concealed their true identity, that of a socialist working-class party, 
behind new rhetorical adornments. The new Conservative programme of 1934 
set up a strong state, true to Swedish historical traditions and independent of 
class-interests, as a fundamental political objective and the attacks on ‘class 
egoism’, ‘class idolatry’ and ‘red class domination’ continued. Following the 
Conservatives, the socialists were abusing the languages of nation (fosterland) 
and popular sovereignty (folkstyre), the preferred conservative synonym to 
democracy.38

In addition, it must be made clear that folk was a politically significant 
concept for all parties, independently of what the social democrats said or did. 
The general suffrage, introduced in 1921, provided the institutional setting 
which forced all parties to compete for votes, to reach out to the people in 
order to maximize support in the new parliamentary democracy. All parties in 
1920s were folkish in this basic sense and they made use of the folk-concept 
in various ways.39 One of the liberal parties, De frisinnade, called itself the 
People’s Liberal Party, Frisinnade folkpartiet or de folkfrisinnade, in the 
elections 1924–1932, and the others followed suit down the folkish road: the 
Farmers’ Party (Bondeförbundet) of the 1930s was the rural areas’ people’s 
party (landsbygdens folkparti), the Conservatives (Högerpartiet) described 
themselves as a national people’s party (nationellt folkparti).40 By selecting 
Folkpartiet – the People’s Party – the liberals reclaimed the name used by 
one of the liberal parties already in the 1890s and emphasised the old liberal 
claim to be the true representatives of the people.41 The Social Democrats

Santérus, 169–170.

38 For the Conservative programme from 1934, Svenska partiprogram och valmanifest 1887–2010, Svensk 
Lindman 1934; Lindman 1935; Bagge 1936. Trägårdh 2002a and 2002b and Stråth 2005 are well 
aware of this and stress the new ways in which the Social Democrats made use of Swedish history 
and traditional national symbols. The weakness rests their binary interpretation of folket as either a 
Conservative or a Social Democratic concept. Another issue is the exaggerated importance they assign 
to the political scientist and Conservative politician Rudolf Kjellén.

39 Hallberg, Mikael & Jonsson, Tomas (1996) ‘Per Albin Hansson och folkhemsretorikens framväxt’. In 
Stockholm: Carlsson, 133–141.


kring demokrati i den svenska rösträttsrörelsens diskurgemenskap, 1887–1902. Umeå: h:strom - Text 
& kultur, passim.
were definitely successful in appropriating *folket*, but they were not alone and active competitors can be found in all political camps. Their success had little to do with the concept *folkhemmet* or any privileged access to ‘the people’. It owned a lot to their welfare politics, *välfärdspolitik*, and the successful ways in which they managed to mobilize popular support.

### The primacy of welfare politics

During the election campaign of 1936, the Social Democrats issued a lavishly illustrated single-issue weekly named ‘The Government that Left Office’, *Regeringen som gick*, a title which referred to their tactical resignation from office right before the summer holidays. That journal, without a single sentence about *folkhemmet*, was all about the economic and social progress produced by Social Democratic welfare politics. Black and white photos and figures illustrated the swift recovery from the depression under the Socialist government and the message laid out in pictures, numbers and words must have been difficult to misunderstand: the new unemployment policies, above all the productive investments in housing and construction, and the agricultural support had saved the country and improved the living conditions for all citizens. The slogan, repeating the central demand from the May Day demonstration that year, in large bold letters read: ‘The welfare politics must continue’.\(^{42}\) *Välfärdspolitik*, welfare politics, stood at the absolute centre of Swedish politics in the 1930s. This was the vitally important concept launched and exploited by the Social Democrats.

There is no doubt that the term ‘welfare’ has a long history in Swedish political discourses, yet it remained a second rank concept for centuries. That changed in the 1930s when it was politicised and temporalized; it gained momentum and its importance increased dramatically as different actors incorporated it into their competing programmes.\(^{43}\) Consequently, it became highly contested: ‘welfare’ and ‘welfare politics’ were the concepts that the parties competed to control. As far as is known, the Social Democrats started to use ‘social welfare politics’ (*social välfärdspolitik*) in 1932 as an umbrella for the different measures needed to combat the current economic crisis and ‘welfare’ climbed to the top in spring the following year when the

---


Riksdag’s ‘welfare committee’ tried to come to a decision on the government’s innovative ‘proto-keynesian’ economic policies. ‘The welfare committee’ – välfärdsutskottet – was the popular name for the committee where the cow-trade bargaining took place in 1933.\(^4^4\) This linked welfare directly to the crisis agreement and provided both an institutional basis and a relatively precise definition of the new concept ‘welfare politics’. The new political dictionary from 1937 stated this quite clearly:

*Welfare politics, the term for the common course, which the Social Democrats and the Farmers’ Party agreed upon in the Riksdag in 1933 [— Following the elections 1936] the Farmers’ Party and the Social Democrats formed a coalition government, and this cooperation can be seen as a direct continuation of the welfare politics. The government’s programme includes that the Social Democrats abstain from any nationalisation plans and together with the Farmers’ Party continue the reform programme.\(^4^5\)*

The package of expansive labour market, social reforms and agricultural support constituted the Social Democrats ‘welfare politics’, a future-oriented programme for reform. The comprehensive programme, helping both unemployed workers and indebted farmers, securing both democratic rule and economic progress, had other names too. Prime Minister Hansson sometimes talked about ‘positive popular employment policies’ (*positiv folkförsörjningspolitik*) and *folkpolitik*, politics for the people, whereas Minister of Social Affairs Möller wrote about the government’s ‘anti-crisis-politics’.\(^4^6\) But ‘welfare politics’ remained the common term used to cover all their different reforms and it appeared in the May Day resolutions, election

---

\(^4^4\) This is very preliminary and I am sure that further studies will uncover the history of ‘welfare politics’ – my own project sets out to do that. For details on the complex negotiations, where the parliamentary committee gradually was sidestepped through the intervention of the government and its direct talks with leading party representatives, see Nyman, Olle (1947) *Svensk parlamentarism 1932-1936. Från minoritetsparlamentarism till majoritetskoalition*. Uppsala & Stockholm: Statsvetenskapliga föreningens och Almqvist & Wiksell, 89–164.

\(^4^5\) Dahlberg, Gunnar & Tingsten, Herbert (1937) *Svensk politisk uppslagsbok*. Stockholm: A-B Svensk Litteratur, 389–390. It is probably not necessary to point out that their 400 page book contains no entry called ‘folkhemmet’. Both authors were Social Democrats.

manifestos and posters. It was the overarching concept used to describe what they had accomplished and what they set up as the coming goals, and this makes ‘politics’ instead of ‘policies’ the correct translation of *välfrädspolitik*. The May Day resolution from 1936 started with a direct appeal: Make this demonstration a ‘general call (*generalmonstring*)’ for continued democratic welfare politics’.47 A few months later, the election manifesto repeated the credo:

*The spirit of mutual understanding, created around the crisis policies, has furthered the general reform work in different areas. [...] The Workers’ Party calls on the citizens to unite behind continued energetic welfare politics.*48

The Social Democrats managed to take full credit for Sweden’s rapid comeback from the depression. The welfare programme became a valuable political asset and they took full advantage of this. The election campaign of 1936 focused on Per Albin – the only Swedish politician ever who, like royalty, was referred to only by his first name. The message was that Hansson’s government had saved the country and ‘Per Albin’ alone could guarantee social progress and peace. ‘At no earlier point in [Swedish history] had a party so systematically grounded its electoral propaganda...on what had already been accomplished and on [an argument] that the politics of the future should go further on [the same] path’.49 This ‘we conquered the crisis-strategy’ paid off handsomely: The Social Democrats increased their support from 41.7 per cent of the votes in 1932 to over 50 per cent six years later.

‘The surest sign that a society has entered into possession of a new concept is that a new vocabulary will be developed, in terms of which the concept can then be publicly articulated and discussed’, concludes Quentin Skinner, and ‘welfare politics’ in the 1930s was certainly such a concept.50 Contestation started immediately and the temperature rose for several years; the new coalition in 1936 with the Farmers’ Party and the Social Democrats in a majority government came as a real let-down for the Liberals and Conservatives and the

temperature fell in the latter half of the decade. In general, non-socialist critique of the new labour market policies and social reforms regularly focused on the need for fiscal moderation, the dangers of producing ‘artificial jobs’ through state intervention and on the grave threats to the free economy caused by the socialists’ planned economy.\textsuperscript{51} The battle-cry ‘system change’, \textit{systemskifte} (a concept familiar from the Swedish politics in the 1980s) was the direct answer to the crisis agreement and the new economic policies. \textit{Folkhemmet} was not a target, while \textit{välfärdspolitiken} constituted the prime trophy. The Conservative critique followed three well-known lines from Hirschman’s typology: 1) it argued that the reforms were costly and dangerous experiments – ‘welfare policies that undermine welfare’, warned party leader Gösta Bagge, 2) the Social Democratic reforms would have adverse effects and produce a welfare-mentality, a dependency on the state, 3) the reforms were of minor significance compared to the general economic recovery which would have taken place without any costly social reforms.\textsuperscript{52} Variations of these three themes can be found in numerous attacks on the Social Democrats in the 1930s, texts where wealth-producing reforms were contrasted to Socialist planning and wastefulness. The welfare-mentality-critique (\textit{understödstagarandan}) accompanied the crisis agreement from the start; the Conservatives contrasted their productive social policy, securing economic growth, with the Social Democrats’ generous alms-giving producing collectivism.

‘The Social Democrats have launched a slogan and they want to base their entire election campaign on this slogan welfare politics’, noted party leader Bagge in 1936 well aware of the stakes involved. He attacked the socialist welfare myth and warned about the long-term dangers involved: that of a socialist planned economy. But the imminent threat was equally grave because the social Social Democrats were about to conquer ‘welfare’ and they did this by portraying themselves as the only positive force in the history of Swedish social policy.\textsuperscript{53} The welfare of the nation was the common objective of all parties, declared the Conservative chairman and introduced what would become the Conservative answer, an attempt to take back ‘welfare’ from the Social Democrats: we also contributed to the now popular social and economic

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{53} Bagge 1936, 60–63, 71–73, 91–94, 98–112, quote 98.
\end{itemize}
reforms. The Liberals argued along similar lines and questioned the Social Democrats’ monopoly on welfare: the main aspects of ‘the so-called welfare politics’ had support from Liberals, Farmers and Social Democrats. No party, argued party leader Andersson, owned the welfare reforms – to distance himself he put ‘welfare politics’ within quotation marks – and no party could claim sole responsibility for the economic recovery. Like the Conservatives, the Liberals also wanted a share of the welfare reforms, and this agenda, the fight to reclaim ‘the welfare politics’ of the 1930s and correct the hegemonic Social Democratic interpretation remained a topic in later Liberal election handbooks, and the struggle to include the Liberals into the recent political history continued in the party leaders’ memoirs.

The coming of the welfare state

The Liberals and Conservatives largely failed to make ‘welfare politics’ common political property. Indirectly, the on-going critique from the non-socialist parties confirmed the political success of the Social Democrats and their control of the key concept; the Social Democrats managed to spread the message that the government had saved the country and that only one party was the true provider of välfärdspolitik. To paraphrase Pauli Kettunen, the Social Democrats could claim ownership to the language and ideology of the virtuous circle of welfare politics, or to quote Esping-Andersen: ‘The net effect, be it warranted or not, was the emergence of a synonymity between the Social Democratic movement, political democracy, economic prosperity, and social welfare’. Economists and economic historians nowadays stress the general economic changes and reduce the impact of the crisis programme. The Social Democrats promoted the opposite interpretation and did quite
well at establishing that message as the political and popular explanation. This caused frustration in the non-socialist quarters and we find sarcastic comments on the fantastic performance of the Social Democratic government:

The whole nation should by now know that Mr Per Albin Hansson has created the welfare state in Sweden, that Mr Gustav Möller saved us from the crisis, that Mr Ernst Wigforss is the best Treasurer of the Realm [riksshushållare] of all time [---] All these truths are clear and evident from the Social Democratic election preaching from Ystad to Haparanda, [---] The members of the latest socialist government are already omniscient and omnibenevolent. Now, the only task that remains is to get the voters to make them omnipotent too.59

In the latter half of the 1930s, when liberals and conservatives complained about their lack of influence and attacked ‘the myth about the importance of “the welfare politics”’, the country of the Middle Way with its celebrated ‘new deal’ was becoming a minor international success.60 Foreign guests marvelled over the wonders of the economic recovery and the seemingly harmonious labour market relations. The Swedish stocks were rising and the praise abroad attracted attention back home; Social Democratic propaganda repeated these statements, and these positive reports reinforced Social Democratic self-understanding.61 As Gustav Möller explained in 1940, when summing up the achievements of the past decade brought to a halt by the war, ‘We were on our way to rebuild old Sweden into a social welfare state. It was not an exaggeration to claim that we in Sweden had advanced further than any other country, maybe with the exception of New Zealand.’ The war had brought an end to partisan competition and strife, so Möller did not give the credit to solely his own party. Instead, he used the inclusive ‘we’ and a great portion of national pride to describe the triumph: ‘We were, to repeat, right in the middle of a construction project that was about to transform Sweden to a “social state”

---

60 Heckscher, Gunnar (1936) ' Högrens valnederlag' Svensk tidskrift, Vol. 23, 626.
[socialstat] of the highest order."62 He was definitely proud – Sweden was the most advanced country in the world in social matters – but not content since deprivation and poverty were still a part of Swedish society, and he finished his speech by reminding his fellow citizens, the people, that the reconstruction project would continue after the war. The primacy of welfare politics would continue to form Social-Sweden. ‘Social-Sweden’, Möller’s concept, would guide the Social Democrats’ welfare politics of the early post-war era.

References


145


Harrie, Ivar (1944) In i fyrtiotalet. Stockholm: Gebers.


Politisk valhandbok 1940 Stockholm: Högerns riksorganisation.

Politisk valhandbok 1942 Stockholm: Högerns riksorganisation.


Regeringen som gick (1936) Stockholm: Socialdemokratiska arbetapartiet & Tiden.


