

THE LAUNCH OF THE SWEDISH NATIONAL PROJECT IN CONCEPTUAL HISTORY

Bo Lindberg 2006. *Den antika skevheten. Politiska ord och begrepp i det tidig-moderna Sverige.* (The Ancient Skewness: Political Words and Concepts in Early Modern Sweden.) Filologiskt arkiv 45. Kungl. Vitterhets, Historie och Antikvitets Akademien: Stockholm. 268 pp. ISBN 91-7402-361-6. With English summary.

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The number of nation-state-centred analyses dealing with long-term conceptual developments is constantly growing. This diversification of conceptual history is aptly illustrated by Bo Lindberg's path-breaking book, *Den antika skevheten. Politiska ord och begrepp i det tidig-moderna Sverige* (2006), which discusses the meanings of Swedish political key concepts from the late Middle Ages to around 1770. The book focuses specifically on the continuity in the classical meanings of political concepts, although it also deals with the changes in their meanings which resulted from attempts to reconcile classical political theory and early modern political realities. Both the theoretical discourse of teaching politics in Latin at universities and examples in more practical political discourse in Swedish are analysed.

This is a thorough and comprehensive book which reflects an exceptional degree of learnedness in the history of political thought and the Latin language. It is written in a style that is easily approachable even for scholars who do not work within the field of conceptual history themselves. It should be considered a very welcome contribution

in the Scandinavian context, in which analyses of political cultures have tended to emphasise social or cultural history rather than the history of ideas and concepts. Lindberg's conceptual approach provides new points of view to Swedish (and Finnish) historiography and highlights some of the peculiarities in Swedish conceptual history, which are worthy of broader international attention.

Methodologically, this is a pragmatic application of the German *Begriffsgeschichte* to the Swedish context, conceptual history being understood as "the history of ideas sunk in language in which ideas are studied . . . as broken into concepts which occur on different levels of abstraction" (9). Lindberg's emphasis is on political theory as discussed by the learned, the goal being to discover when the concepts upon which he focuses entered Sweden, the types of meanings they acquired, and how these meanings have changed through time. Though the uses of the concepts are generally well contextualised, this is not an analysis of innovative speech acts in conflict situations in the Skinnerian sense, but focuses on the continuity created by the recycling of concepts within a slowly changing and protected academic environment. Nor is this a reductionist attempt to link the analysis of changing concepts and social structures, although certain structural changes are also occasionally referred to.

The concepts analysed in the book are politics, state, citizen, people, freedom and democracy, all of which were selected because they played (with the exception of democracy) a central role in early modern political discourse and even more so in later centuries. Lindberg uses these concepts as analytical entities and as semantic fields which he assumes to have existed throughout his period of study regardless of the specific terminological expressions they received. Such a mildly sociological approach leads Lindberg to suggest that some concepts were present in 'unfinished' form in the early modern period. This is a strategy that can lead to teleological conclusions in cases in which the basic analytic framework is the analytical concept of the historian rather than actual contemporary usage.

A central methodological tool in Lindberg's analysis is the study of Sweden as a 'bilingual' political culture. His analyses tend to open with a summary of the classical meanings of each concept and the instances of their continuity in Sweden at least until the Age of Liberty (1720-72), when vernacular political discourse began to replace Latin. This leads to a number of interesting discussions on the contrasts be-

tween Swedish political realities and the potentially deviating associations which classical political terminology produced when they were applied to contemporary political communities. Although there were few possibilities for political theorists to distance themselves from the classical tradition, some thinkers were conscious of these contradictions and in some cases even attempted to redefine the Latin political vocabulary. Importantly, the dominance of Latin made it easy for the authorities to delimit the discussion of potentially subversive ideas to the political and academic elite.

As a consequence of Lindberg's special interest in the Latin language, much of his discussion focuses on the seventeenth century, whereas the accelerating conceptual changes which took place in the eighteenth century are discussed on the basis of relatively few printed sources and with an emphasis on the 'radical' late Age of Liberty. The Age of Liberty does, of course, deserve attention because of its estates-centred mixed form of government, which may have produced conceptual innovations that appear unique in international comparisons. Lindberg illustrates how Swedish became a language of both theoretical and practical politics simultaneously with the broadening of publicity and participation, and he argues that the seventeenth-century feudal hierarchy was substituted by the language of a self-conscious early nation-state in conjunction with the major revolution in political culture which took place in the late phase of the Age of Liberty. According to Lindberg, the Gustavian restoration of the monarchy (1772) was only able to postpone this modernisation temporarily. In order to really prove this point, it might have been useful to continue the analysis to the true fall of early modern Sweden, which did not take place until 1809. In doing so, the radical nature of conceptual change in the Age of Liberty would have been viewed within the long-term context and the obvious traditionalism of the Gustavian era properly recognised. Furthermore, conceptual analyses based on parallel sources from other countries would have demonstrated the extent to which the development of a modern nation-state in Sweden occurred prior to in the majority of Western Europe.

We could perhaps also ask whether early modern Sweden truly was just a 'bilingual' political culture, given that much of the elite used French and that Finnish and German were majority languages in certain parts of the realm. It may well have been that Finnish, for instance, "meant nothing in political contexts" (29), but that the trans-

lation of Swedish political discourse into Finnish had very long-term consequences in the formation of the Finnish political culture after the separation of the two countries in 1809. Even more problematic than the lack of Finnish primary sources are the sparse references to modern historiography published in Finnish or English by Finnish historians. Comparisons with Kari Saastamoinen's conclusions on the early modern Swedish language of politics, for instance, which is based on a number of the same sources, deals with many of the same concepts (*folk, allmogen, suverenität, borgerligt samhälle, frihet, stat, medborgare*) and was presented in *Käsitteet liikkeessä* in 2003, would have been essential.

Lindberg's findings are extensive, although there are quite few references to the actual word *politics*, for instance, in his sources, and hence his conclusions are rather cautious. All around Europe, the term *politicus* referred primarily to the authors of political tracts as opposed to acting 'politicians'. The vocabulary of politics was used extensively in an ironic sense, and it is thus no wonder that politics was not a word of honour or even widely used in Sweden. Some further references to the existing research on the conceptual history of politics would have been helpful here (Ihalainen 1999; Palonen 2006).

The conclusions regarding the semantic field of the political community (shortened to the state) can also be viewed in a broader European context. The term 'republic', for instance, could refer to the political community in general but sometimes also stood for a state with a free form of government. Yet Lindberg shows how, in Sweden, the concept of society (*samhället*) rose to the forefront of the political debate and how state and civil society came to be seen as identical by the mid-eighteenth century (cf. Saastamoinen 2003, 43). This is a peculiar conceptual shift which later led to an emphasis on the role of state in all aspects of society, both in Sweden and in Finland (cf. Kettunen 2003; Ihalainen 2005b; Ihalainen 2005c, 242).

The chapter on membership in the political community shows how the term citizen (*medborgare*) only began to be used in such senses in the eighteenth century and remained undistinguishable from the older concept of 'subject' (*undersåte*). Only certain references to the noble estate diverge from this brand of royalist patriotism. In the late Age of Liberty, the term *odalman* challenged the privileges of the nobility, and the term *patriot* gained explicitly political, civic and fatherland-loving nuances. By 1760, the emphasis on loyalty in the name of

the common good had turned into a republican criticism of the monarchy in Anders Nordencrantz's texts, which were influenced by British political theorists. Nonetheless, it is still an exaggeration to refer to Nordencrantz's demands for the liberty of the citizens within the estates-centred political system as 'modern liberalism' (119).

Lindberg's discussion of the concept of *fäderneslandet* (the country of the fathers; alternatively *fosterlandet*, the native country) adds to what we already know about related concepts in Germany, France, the Netherlands and Denmark (Fehrenbach 1986; *Vaterland* 1999; Feldbæk 1991). The Swedish term *fäderneslandet* had stood for both the country and its inhabitants since the Middle Ages, had become a favourite term of the Crown, and was used by Gustavus Adolphus in an attempt to persuade the subjects to love the entire Swedish realm in the same way as they loved their home region. The dual meaning of the classical term *patria* as both region and realm survived for longer, however.

The chapter on *the people* and *nation* includes what is perhaps the most important argument in the whole book, suggesting that despite the relatively marginal political role of the people (*folk*) for much of the early modern period, the meanings associated with it were transformed by the 1770s, which Lindberg sees as a 'national moment' which led to the emergence of 'protonationalism' (124, 127). Like GG, Lindberg sees the people and nation as a single concept with ethnic/national (discussed with the term *nation*), political (referred to as *folk*), social (*gemena hopen* or the common people) and 'ecclesiastical' meanings, the last having lost its relevance by 1700, which is not necessarily the case (cf. Smith 2003; Ihalainen 2005a; Ihalainen 2005b; Ihalainen 2007). Lindberg analyses the political concept of the people by contrasting its Roman and early modern usages. The Latin concept of *populus Romanus* could be understood as referring to both the rulers and the ruled, and to citizens who together constituted the people, enjoying liberty and actively taking part in public affairs. In the early modern period, the people were predominantly viewed as separate from the rulers and had no political role beyond the original creation of political power. Hoping to deduce when it actually became possible to reunite the rulers and the ruled with the use of the concept of the people, Lindberg explores how the concept was extended to include the lower orders. His thesis is that "the Swedish people" established itself as a political agent by the end of the Age of Liberty.

Traditionally, the term *populus* referred exclusively to a tiny elite in the discussions surrounding the relationship between the people and rulers. By the mid-seventeenth century, however, the principle presented by some German theorists of political power as originating from the people had already also been adopted by some Swedish theorists (see also Van Gelderen 2002, 206-7, 212). Michael Wexonius Gyldenstolpe argued in 1657 that there was no other origin of power in Sweden than God and the free people, God thus acting via the people. Yet nothing like the concept of “the Swedish people” emerged, and the vernacular *folk* had only marginal political significance, the Riksdag remaining unwilling to identifying itself with the people, avoiding republican connotations which an analogy of the Roman people could have produced. No stable idea of the nation or the people as an entity existed in a society which was divided by the estates (Lindberg, 153-7). A more distinctly political concept of the people began to emerge already with the establishment of estate rule around 1720, the abolition of absolutism being seen as the restoration of the right of the people to choose their own form of government. This way of thinking was formulated philosophically in the translation into Swedish of John Locke’s *Two Treatises*, which maintained that the “highest power” had always remained “in the hands of the people”. The old phrase “free people” was reintroduced and the term civil society (*borgerliga samhallet*) was associated with the political order of the Age of Liberty. This included the basic assumption that political power had been given to the rulers by the people (cf. Saastamoinen 2003, 50).

Lindberg sees another turning point in the confrontation between the monarchy and the Hat party in the 1750s, in which the Hats argued that the highest legislative power belonged to the free Swedish people represented at the Riksdag. Around the same time, Johan Browallius wrote about the estates as “authoritative exercisers of the rights of a free people, among whom alone the law is sovereign and absolute” (93). An early concept of the representation of the people was already beginning to take shape in Carl Fredrik Scheffer’s emphasis to the future monarch that the unlimited and absolute power belonged to “the Swedish people” or “their representatives who are called the estates of the realm” (93). The concept of “the Swedish people” and arguments on the supreme power (the term ‘sovereignty’ could not be used) as having always belonged to the people also began to emerge in historiographical discourse around this time. In the 1760s, some

tracts addressing “the Swedish people” suggested that the supreme power belonged to the Estates who represented the people. Lindberg concludes that the nation was turning political and the modern nation-state becoming possible, despite his admission that ‘the people’ by no means replaced the older vocabulary of realm and estates (162-4). Indeed, a look at the journals of the Estates indicates that the Riksdag remained unwilling to identify themselves with the people up until the end of the Age of Liberty. The nobility might talk about ‘the people’, but the peasantry continued to talk about ‘the multitude’. As such, these individual statements alone do not constitute any kind of conceptual change at the level of a political culture. Comparative studies based on more extensive sources from various countries are needed before we can retime the decisive national moment in European history and pinpoint it as having taken place in Sweden during the 1760s. Lindberg’s suggestion that the concept of the people was extended to include many more inhabitants in the late 1760s should be seen in the context of the burghers striving for privileges which the nobility already had and using the rhetoric of the people for that purpose.

The standard suggestion in Swedish literature seems to be that the restoration of the monarchical power in 1772 did not affect such innovative formulations of popular power. Gustavus III adopted the vocabulary of the previous regime and neutralised the potentially republican content of concepts such as citizen, freedom, fatherland, patriotism, and the people. The monarch even applied the Roman concept of the people when arguing that he was one of the citizens who constituted the people. For Lindberg, this shows that “the development in political concepts in the Age of Liberty was not lost” (169). This reviewer would have liked, however, to see a clearer recognition of the reactionary tendencies of the Gustavian regime and the general standstill in political discourse which it produced (cf. Lindroth 1978 and Lindroth 1981, and the chapters on the two periods in Frängsmyr 2000). Lindberg provides an excellent example of the collectivist tendency of the Gustavian era when discussing the amalgamation of the concepts of the people, the state and society in late eighteenth-century texts, none of which referred to either popular sovereignty or active citizenship. The Finnish project in conceptual history has already demonstrated how this amalgamation has remained part of the political debate to this day – at least in Finland (Kettunen 2003; Stenius 2003; Ihalainen 2005b).

And what about the concept of *liberty*, which has been accepted by many as a denomination of the entire period of 1720-1772? Without a doubt, an overwhelming amount of positive rhetoric on liberty can be found in the Swedish vernacular since the fifteenth century, and quite independently of any classical republican associations. Religious liberty stood primarily for independence from Catholicism and thus became closely associated with national liberty, or independence from other powers. Constitutional liberty referred to the right of the people to participate in decision-making to the extent that Lindberg writes about 'popular sovereignty', although he concedes that there were quite few references to the people in Swedish political texts, and what references did exist were related primarily to the aristocracy. As to privileges, Lindberg compares the *Magna Carta* and Magnus Eriksson's Law (*Landslag*) and finds a recognition of "social equality" in the latter in that the Swedish king was supposed to protect not only the nobility but also all the free and even the poor (178). Perhaps this conclusion is a slight exaggeration, but the representation of the wealthy peasants at the Riksdag did ensure them rights rarely enjoyed by commoners elsewhere in Europe and explains the references to them as "free people".

Lindberg argues that the idea of constitutional liberty was radicalised in the late Age of Liberty, thanks to a combination of the traditional language of "the free people" and "free nation," the estates-centred political system, and radical ideas borrowed from abroad. Some writers extended liberty to include the freedom of the people to decide on their form of government, though maintaining that the rights of the free people were to be exercised by the Estates. A more extensive discourse on the freedom of the press and trade emerged, and some contemporaries scholars even wrote about "our current age of liberty" (186). Lindberg suggests that the liberty of the individual was also discussed and sees the conflict on estate privileges as the defence of "middle-class interests . . . against the aristocracy" (191). This leads to the conclusion that Sweden experienced "an entire era which calls itself the Age of Liberty, and this happened before *Sattelzeit* (in Germany) . . . had barely begun." (194) Until the eighteenth century, most intellectual innovations made their way to Sweden via Germany; now Sweden was taking the lead in terms of political modernisation. However, the justification of this repeated thesis on the Swedish Age of Liberty as a forerunner in relation to all other political systems requires further evidence.

Perhaps Lindberg's final chapter on *democracy* can provide us with the evidence we need. Writing the history of democracy in the eighteenth century is a challenging task given the universally positive connotations of the concept and its widespread use in the identity construction of most political communities today. The meanings of 'democracy' changed so dramatically over the course of the eighteenth century that even a conceptual historian might be tempted to apply the term in its positive and broader modern senses to a period in which democracy was still viewed in very critical terms. In the mid-eighteenth century, positive understandings of democracy were extremely rare, despite some English and Dutch radicals' arguments in their favour. Democracy could be seen as an element within mixed governments, but generally speaking the entire political system only began to be described with the term 'democracy' after the French Revolution (Velema 2002, 14-15, 20-1; Van Gelderen 2002, 215-16; Bödeker 2002, 222, 227-8; Crick 2002; Hansen 2005; Dunn 2005).

Lindberg points out that democracy was primarily discussed in learned texts, mostly in Latin, and without any real application to the contemporary world. Instead of considering the continuous influence of the classical criticism of democracy, he sees classical democracy as an ideological challenge that forced Swedish thinkers to reconsider their own political system. According to Lindberg, *politeia* and *demokratia* had not been clearly distinguished by Aristotle, whose concept of 'citizen' also included a distinctly 'democratic' element and could hence be read in radical and democratic terms by early modern theorists. By Polybius, Lindberg argues, *demokratia* had appeared as a 'neutral' name for the power of the people (15, 101, 195-6). Although the Aristotelian ideal of a mixed government (*politeia*) was widely known, some contemporary political systems viewed as being based on popular power, and the *Roman* republican traditions emphasising liberty and active citizen participation were approved by a number of theorists, the picture offered by Lindberg does not fully correspond with the one portrayed in the research cited above. Lindberg has found some evidence of the approval of democracy (used here in the broad sense of just 'equality' and 'freedom') in Sweden dating back farther than anything previously cited by any other historians in any other country. Jonas Magni (1624), he argues, already viewed the political influence of the people within a mixed government in positive terms (which is consistent with the Aristotelian ideal) and democracy

as the opposite of corrupt forms of government. Yet Magni doubted the political capabilities of the simple and inconsistent people, rejected the Athenian form of direct democracy, and did not refer to any democratic elements in the Swedish mixed monarchy (91,197, 199, 203, 206) – all of which actually reflect rather conventional conceptions of democracy.

It is, of course, arguable that the academic discourse on democracy in several Northern European countries encouraged theorists to view it in more positive terms, as a synonym of *politeia*. Was this perhaps also the case in eighteenth-century Sweden? It is evident that there were no major breakthroughs in the use of the term and few positive connotations assigned to democracy in political discourse. Despite this, Lindberg argues that the word became more frequent, that the concept of citizen began to take on more 'democratic' connotations, and that the contemporaries started to view the era as "more democratic in the sense of equality" than the previous one (114, 209). Johan Hermansson (1728) called Sweden a monarchy which was "democratically tempered" in that the monarch was elected. A 1737 dissertation suggested that the best state of the learned was 'democratic' in the sense of allowing intellectual freedom, which is clearly not a political statement (210). It was quite conventional to recognise the democratic element in mixed governments as well.

Lindberg provides at least one piece of evidence that deserves more attention. The arguments of Johan Montin Johansson's 1749 text seem so unconventional that this reviewer had to consult the text himself, with help from Charlotta Wolff. According to Lindberg, Montin, who wrote in the context of a dispute which concerned the responsibility of the delegates to their electors, described the Swedish system as a "limited democracy" (Lindberg's term) in which the estates were equal among themselves and held the highest power in the realm. Democracy in this sense was a form of government that "made security and welfare possible without the least loss of liberty and has therefore been chosen by peoples who are most zealous for the noble liberty" (210). Indeed, Montin defined democracy in very positive terms as an antidote to tyranny and aristocracy within a mixed government and argued that a government could be called a 'democracy' when "an assembly of the Estates themselves possess the supreme rights" (Montin 1749, 69-70, 77-8, 83-4). Montin's positive understanding of democracy only concerned the diet, however, and not the power of

the many (*Menighets-vælde*), as Lindberg points out (210-11). His very point was to reject wrong kinds of democracy by defining the existing system as the right kind of democracy. He followed the classical critique of the power of the many when pointing to its impracticality in large societies in which the people could not simply assemble themselves in one place. According to Montin, the power of the many threatened the understanding of the common people, who were incapable of judging correctly. Furthermore, even the best of democratic governments could lead to the ultimate destruction of the society as a result of disunity (Montin 1749, 70, 75, 79-80).

Lindberg goes too far in viewing Montin "at an abstract and general historical level" as an advocate of "representative democracy as opposed to direct" so that "the Estates represent the people and make decisions on their behalf" (211; cf. opposite conclusions on estate rule in Gustafsson 1994, 157; Saastamoinen 2003, 49; Velema 2002, 21, on the Dutch debate). From the point of view of conceptual history, this is a problematic interpretation, as the concepts of 'the people', 'representation' or 'sovereignty' are all missing from Montin's argument. What Montin said, rather, was that the supreme power should be delegated to qualified members elected by each estate, the power centred in the meetings of these delegates (*Fullmäktige*) of the estates and not to the people at large (Montin 1749, 72-3, 84). This is actually very much the language of the British style of parliamentary sovereignty within a mixed government expressed in Swedish terms, not a defence of modern representative democracy. The sovereignty of the Estates was not an expression that was possible in Sweden, where 'sovereignty' was widely rejected as absolute royal power (Saastamoinen 2003, 37-39). Montin could not and did not argue that "sovereignty is placed in the hands of the Estates who represent the people," as Lindberg suggests (211). We cannot hence conclude that the ideas of representative democracy and popular sovereignty would have been formulated in Sweden in 1749.

Swedish political documents and treatises must be compared with other early formulations of popular sovereignty and popular representation before we can claim that there is any real need to rewrite history in this respect. In my view, the evidence provided in this book does not reveal the existence of a democratic moment in the conceptual history of the Swedish Age of Liberty. We do have the 1751 instance in which democracy was used polemically to counter claims

that Sweden was an aristocracy, but this may have been nothing more than a mere suggestion that Sweden was indeed a mixed monarchy with a truly democratic element. Anders Nordencrantz's statement in favour of the application of "democratic judgement" in science was not extended to politics. Though Lindberg argues that "the tendency of the debate can undoubtedly be described as democratic in the sense of equality" in the late Age of Liberty (213), he concedes that the 'radical' writers of the time did not use the term to describe themselves. Instead, the term was used by others to attack them. Anders Chydenius was rejected as a fanatic who advocated "democratic principles"; democracy was seen as a form of government which could not be any worse than it was; and the French ambassador described the Swedish domestic crisis as an epidemic disease of "the love of democracy" (213). Thus far, this reviewer has not been able to find any positive references to democracy in the papers of the Swedish eighteenth-century Riksdag either.

These critical points on Lindberg's discussion of the formulations of popular sovereignty and representative democracy in mid-eighteenth-century Sweden are not meant to challenge this important book as a whole. They merely suggest that a comparative analysis of the eighteenth-century Swedish political debate and those in other countries would help us to assess the innovativeness of the Swedish experience in a broader European context. Lindberg's book is a major achievement as an overall interpretation of the developments of political thought in early modern Sweden. It is truly pioneering in its analysis of a high variety of both Latin and Swedish texts from an extensive historical period and in reminding us of the fundamental role played by the classical examples throughout the early modern period. Its numerous clearly presented and convincing conclusions offer an excellent point of departure for further research in conceptual history. It should be seen as the opening of the Swedish national project in conceptual history and should be consulted as such by all the historians of the period, including those interested in the comparative conceptual history of political cultures.

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