

# Resolving the dilemma between equality and liberty: the Swedish political system

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## Abstract

*Swedish democracy ranks very high in international democracy indexes. It fascinates political scientists from all over the world because it seems to have resolved a fundamental political dilemma: the choice between equality and liberty, without the historical inconvenient of regimes which favoured too much equality - but killed liberty, or regimes which favoured liberty - but failed to make citizens equal... The "egalitarian pluralism" practiced in Swedish political system is rooted in a specific political culture. This culture has opted for popular sovereignty and comes from the ancient peasant society. Lutheran values and the absence of feudalism paved the way to the search for equality and the edification of a strong State. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Social-democrats endorsed the traditional Swedish values and prolonged them in the so-called Swedish model, with social policies allowing more equality along with more individual autonomy. Nowadays, the model is evolving, coping with globalization, and the definition of equality is under discussion.*

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## 1. Introduction

The Swedish model (or more generally the Nordic model) has been fascinating researchers from all over the world since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, both as a socio-economic model of welfare state, and as a model of accomplished democracy. This fascination is due to the fact that these countries have given original and efficient responses to problems of social organization. In the political sphere, especially, Sweden represents a model of a particularly accomplished democracy. Sweden – as well as other Nordic countries - invariably

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ranks in the top ten of virtually all international indexes measuring democracy: for example in the *Democracy index* established by the Economist Intelligence Unit, in the Global Gender Gap Report by the World Economic Forum, in the Corruption perceptions index by Transparency International, etc.

The interest that political scientists show for the Swedish political system is manifold but one particular aspect is outstanding: the Swedish democracy is raising hope, hope that it is possible to solve what has been, since the ancient Greece, the equivalent to the problem of squaring the circle in politics, that is combining equality and liberty. Swedish democracy would thus be more accomplished than liberal democracies, which guarantee liberty but where equality is far from perfect. At the same time, it is an egalitarian model without the shortcomings of Marxist systems, which did not set up equality as they promised, but also totally sacrificed liberty. In sum, the Swedish system would have carried out equality of citizens in the best way that is, without having sacrificed liberty.

But, in politics, models can never be imitated. Even though politicians from all over the world go to Scandinavia to observe Swedish democracy at work (as many of them frequently do), it is very unlikely they can have their own country turned into another Sweden... Even if Swedish democracy is one of the most transparent in the world, its mystery remains unsolved. This question of liberty and equality in the Swedish system has seldom been examined in political science, except when, in the 1970's, the Swedish model was accused of being too extreme in its search for equality, and of killing liberties... The British journalist Roland Huntford, for example, claimed Sweden was the country of the "*new totalitarians*" (Huntford, 1971; Aucante, 2013).

This paper will start from the idea that democracy is based on institutions, but that institutions are not enough to make an accomplished democracy. There are many examples of mere exportation of democratic institutions - after colonization for instance - that ended up in failure. Democracy is in the first place a political culture, embedded in social practice. As Giovanni Sartori put it, "*Democracy denotes more than political machinery; it also denotes a way of living, a 'social democracy', in particular these democracies that have gone a long way towards the maximization of equality – equality of status, of opportunity, and of starting points*" (Sartori, 1968, p. 117). On this basis, this paper will show the peculiarities of the practice of equality in the Swedish political system, then it will track its origins, as well as some common stereotypes recent research allows to unmask.

## **2. Sweden: equality for real**

In Sweden, equality is not a legend. The nation's history is that of a fight against poverty that was raging in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century and of the edification of a modern nation, relieved of privilege and inequality. What was remarkable in the Swedish case was not the aim of equality in itself, but the method adopted to attain this aim: it was taken for real, not as a mere philosophical ideal. The Swedish method was made of determination and pragmatism. It was very different from the

French or the American revolutionists' method, who claimed abstract Declarations of rights that citizens would later invoke in courts. In this respect, it is very interesting to note that Swedish constitutions traditionally do not say much about civil rights – apart from the 1776 constitutional law enacting freedom of the press, the first of that kind in the world. It is only in the 1974 constitution that a chapter was devoted to civil rights. It was later completed, and the present constitution is now very extensive on that matter. But what indeed counts in Sweden is not the letter of the law, but the social practice, the pragmatic solving of problems. As Olof Petersson showed, Sweden has a rather “*a-constitutional*” conception of civil rights: “*Citizens rights were largely viewed as social rights granted by the welfare State, rather than inalienable human rights laid down in any abstract constitution or granted by some natural law*” (Petersson, 2009). Such a conception may have its limits – the enforcement of civil rights actually depending on the will of the ruling majority or on political consensus – but the pragmatic Swedish method nonetheless distinguished itself by its success: today, even after two decades of reforms and austerity measures, the nation ranks very high in international indexes. In 2012, Sweden ranked in the second position in the Democracy index after Norway and before Iceland and Denmark<sup>1</sup>. Finland was 9<sup>th</sup>. All Nordic countries were classified “full democracies<sup>2</sup>”. Sweden also ranked in 4<sup>th</sup> position in the Global Gender Gap Index in 2012<sup>3</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> in the 2012 Corruption perception index<sup>4</sup>. Sweden is also a country where women are best represented in politics: the Swedish Riksdag (parliament) counted 45% of elected women after the 2010 poll, and there have been parity governments since 1994. The young are also comparatively well represented in Sweden: the youngest member of the Riksdag, Anton Amadé Abele, was 18 when he was elected in 2010. A statistic established by the Riksdag in 2000 showed that among the 249 MPs, 13 were between 18 and 29 (that is 3.7%). In 2006, they were only 0.5 % but history has shown that it is possible for very young people to become MPs in Sweden<sup>5</sup>.

At last, to go on with this rapid sketch of the Swedish model, it must be reminded that it ensures correction of inequalities and redistribution of wealth through a very performing welfare State, as well as by taxation and salary leveling. In spite of austerity measures taken during the last two decades, equality in Sweden still does comparatively well, even if its performances are somehow downgrading (Aucante, 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> Democracy Index 2012, <http://pages.eiu.com/rs/eiu2/images/Democracy-Index-2012.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> The index uses five criteria: electoral process and pluralism; civil liberties; the functioning of government; political participation; and political culture. Each nation is categorized across gradient levels of regimes: full democracies, flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian regimes.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum, <http://www.weforum.org/issues/global-gender-gap>.

<sup>4</sup> Transparency International, <http://www.transparency.org/cpi2012/results>.

<sup>5</sup> In 2007, the average age of MPs was 47.6.

### 3. Egalitarian pluralism, compromise and consensus

In Sweden, the practice of political equality derives from a conception of democracy that is far more demanding than the simple equation “one man, one vote”. Beyond universal suffrage, Sweden has wished to put into practice equality of chances to participate in the political process, and moreover, to make equality of chances effective. And this wish was turned into reality. The political participation rate is particularly high in Sweden: generally, voter turnout is above 80 %, and party and union membership are comparatively high (even if they are declining, which is a general trend in Europe). Moreover, citizens are granted easy access to the media by constitutional laws (the latest one, dating 1991, also takes non-written media into account). Moreover, parity, as already mentioned, is enforced.

But beyond representation and participation, Swedish equality is enacted through the very nature and functioning of its political system, belonging to the “consensual democracy” model established by Arend Lijphart (opposed to majoritarian democracy) (Lijphart, 1984). With multipartism and proportional representation, it is difficult for a single party to achieve majority. Governments are most often minority coalition governments. They play a pivotal role in the center, that is to say that they have to gather support either from the left or the right, whereas opposition tends to restrain itself. This pattern has also been called “negative parliamentarism”, a form of parliamentarism in which governments are “tolerated” by the majority in Parliament (Lewin, 1998). But governments are not necessarily weak: as Olof Petersson put it, the characteristic of the Swedish political system is that it combines equality and strong government (Petersson, 1994).

In such a system, equality raises from the very functioning of the regime. There is no such scenario as an absolute majority legally smashing the minority down (as it is the case in France for example). In Sweden, all parties are legitimate and must be respected on condition they have obtained 4 % in the parliamentary election, or more generally on the very ground they represent voters<sup>6</sup>. Lenin once said that if a revolutionary government came into power in Stockholm, it would first have had to invite bourgeois parties for dinner, and they would have returned the favour back... That was a good observation of the fundamental idea underlying the Swedish democracy, according to which the government shares power with all the opposition parties. It is on that condition that it is legitimate for the whole people, who can then give their loyalty back to it. Such a legitimate government have to find out what common will is, to express the whole people’s will, and to look for consensus formation.

To understand Swedish democracy, a fundamental remark that has rarely been made must be considered here. Swedish democracy is based on the concept of popular sovereignty derived from the ideas of Rousseau, and not on the national

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<sup>6</sup> Swedes are often shocked by the way extremist parties are ostracized in some foreign countries. In Sweden, these parties are considered legitimate as they represent voters. So they must be opposed by debating, not by putting them aside from the political scene.

sovereignty derived from Montesquieu and Siéyès' ideas<sup>7</sup>: article one of the constitution<sup>8</sup> says "*All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people*". Rousseau was animated by a deep passion for equality, and his theory of popular sovereignty was meant to ensure a perfect mathematic representation of all citizens forming the "people", defined as a non-divisible social body. According to Rousseau, this non-divisible social body should have but one common will, equally non-divisible, that he called "the General will". However, this idea logically led to refusing pluralism, as the vote was only meant to unveil what the content of the General will was, and not to have a majority express itself: in the *Contrat social*, Rousseau wrote: "*When a law is proposed to the people's assembly, what is precisely asked is not that they approve or reject the proposal, but if it is in conformity or not with the General will (...) So when an opinion contrary to mine wins, this but proves that I was wrong, and that what I thought to be the General will was not it. If my particular will had won, I would have done something else than what I wanted, and then I would not have been free*"<sup>9</sup>. It's easy to see why Rousseau later fascinated theoreticians of "unanimous democracy" (considering the people as uniform and non divisible, best represented by a single party), such as the early Marxists. On the contrary, Siéyès, whose views became dominant during the French revolution, supported the concept of national sovereignty. The nation was viewed as an abstract concept, representing the present people but also their ancestors and the born-to-be in all their diversity, this conception allowing a plurality of opinions to express themselves freely. However, this theory had an inconvenient: the definition of the nation was left open and, in the decades following the Revolution, access to citizenship happened to be granted on very restrictive conditions (censitary suffrage)... The fact that the Swedish constitution refers to popular sovereignty (the word "nation" is totally absent from it) is undoubtedly related to the Swedish passion for equality. Nonetheless, Sweden has avoided the trap of "unanimous democracy", and truly respects pluralism, probably more than many other pluralist democracies do. Actually, Swedish egalitarianism is peculiar; it could be labelled as "egalitarian pluralism" because it does not only consist in respecting one's political adversary and bowing before him when his

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<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the question to know if the 1809 Swedish constitution was inspired by national or foreign ideas aroused. But as Gunnar Hecksher showed it, at that time, elites were well aware of ideas and theories circulating in intellectual circles all over Europe, and all Europeans referred more or less to the same prominent thinkers (Hecksher, 1965).

<sup>8</sup> Instrument of government, Svensk författningssamling, SFS nr: 1974:152, reprinted 2003:593. In addition to the Instrument of Government, Sweden has three fundamental laws, the Act of Succession, the Freedom of the Press Act and the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression. The Riksdag Act occupies an intermediate position between a fundamental law and ordinary law. Full texts of all the fundamental acts and the Riksdag Act are available on [www.riksdagen.se](http://www.riksdagen.se).

<sup>9</sup> Our translation.

opinion wins. Egalitarian pluralism also means that all parties are considered legitimate and respectable and thus they have to work together in the decision making process.

This egalitarian pluralism comes along with a very important element of the political regime that allowed avoiding the trap of unanimism: in this regime, adverse opinions are not muzzled nor depicted as being wrong. On the contrary, all opinions must be expressed freely and opponents have to work together to elaborate a consensus. The search for consensus is a masterpiece of the decision-making process, which can be defined as “neo-corporatist”, that is to say there is an institutionalized dialogue between rival interests (Mény, Thoenig, 1989). At the beginning of the law making process, the government or the Parliament asks for the setting up of a Royal inquiry committee (*utredning*), gathering experts from the civil society, civil servants, and members of political parties. They elaborate an *utredning* report including all proposals they make, which is sent to all concerned institutions which in turn can make observations (*remiss* process). Every citizen can also consult the *utredning* report and make an observation. The various observations can be used to amend the draft law and then, the adequate permanent commission in the Parliament will elaborate the final version of the law that will be debated during the parliamentary session. It is interesting to note that the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the *utredning* reports are unanimous: *utredning* and *remiss* allow a large participation of various interests and conflicts can be solved in an informal and direct way before the draft becomes public. This added to the fact that in a nine-million-inhabitant country, political elites are a very restraint circle, largely favours consensus formation.

#### **4. A traditional political culture**

The search for consensus, which is a characteristic of the Swedish democracy has often been linked to modern social-democracy. But actually, it dates back to monarchy, and even to times previous to the Enlightenment: the Swedish king wanted all opinions to be represented and politics to be accepted by the whole people. Leif Lewin has noted that, when, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Left wanted to introduce a form of parliamentarism inspired by the Westminster model, Liberals were opposed to it, on the ground parliamentarism meant the rule of majority against minority... According to Liberals, the search for consensus, meaning that two opposite parties manage to produce politics beneficial for all, was embedded in the Swedish tradition (Lewin, 1998).

More generally speaking, Swedish egalitarianism has often been associated to social-democracy. This is not a mistake, given the preponderant place the Social-democratic party had in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish political life; but actually it is also close to a stereotype, for the Swedish passion for equality is far older than social-democracy. In collective memory, it is Per Albin Hansson, a social-democrat politician, who expressed the will to build up an egalitarian democracy in the most remarkable way. In a 1928 parliamentary debate, he declared the goal was not to

build up an ordinary democracy, but “the people’s home” (*folkhem*): “*The basis of the home is togetherness and common feeling. The good home does not consider anyone as privileged or unappreciated (...) Applied to the great people’s and citizen’s home this would mean the breaking down of all the social and economic barriers that now divide citizens into the privileged and the unfortunate, into rulers and subjects, into rich and poor, the gluttons and the destitute, the plunderers and the plundered*” (Hansson in Berkling, 1982).

However, the *folkhem*’s existence was prior to the social-democratic era. Recent research shows that the development of a welfare state preventing inequalities had begun well before the 1928 parliamentary debate (Andersson, 2009; Björck 2009; Johnson 2006). The very concept of *folkhem* had been used by a liberal politician, Alfred Petersson I Påboda from 1908 and by the conservative Rudolf Kjellén from 1912 (Dahlqvist, 2002). The first achievements of *folkhem* were reached at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by “non socialist” or “radical liberal” governments (Sørensen, Ø., Stråth B. 1997). For instance, a law on public school was passed in 1842, a law on workers protection in 1889, a law on pensions in 1913, a law on the eight hours working day in 1919... As Mary Hilson writes “*The beginnings of the welfare State were linked not to the political compromises of the 1930s, but to the emergence of a predominantly agrarian liberal middle class in the late nineteenth century*” (Hilson, 2010, p. 92). Moreover, at that time, numerous social protection initiatives were taken by the private sector, especially by enterprises, or by what was called *bruk*, a pre-industrial traditional kind of social organisation<sup>10</sup>(Blanc-Noël, 1997, p. 70).

#### 4.1. Egalitarianism and social-democracy

It is not our intention to minimize the role played by social-democracy in the building up of the *folkhem*: equality and solidarity are fundamental values of the social-democratic party which played an absolute dominant role in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish political life: between 1930 and 1990, the SAP (Social-democratic Labour Party) obtained between 40 % and 50 % of votes (an average of almost 44%). Since 1990, its scores declined and “non-socialist” governments came into power in 1991, 2006 and 2010. Between 1998 and 2012, the score of the SAP varied between 36.4 % and 30.74 % of votes at parliamentary elections. In other words, the SAP ruled Sweden during the  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the period when Sweden has practiced universal suffrage (Therborn, 1992). Not only has the SAP been the dominant political force in Sweden since the 1930s, but its values also deeply permeated into the nation, through a complete network of organizations offered to the population “from the cot

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<sup>10</sup> The *Bruk* was a complex made up of several production units, centered for example around a mine, and including a foundry, a glasswork, an ironworks, some farming... The *bruk* belonged to a private owner and was a form of community based on patriarchal relations. Workers and their families were offered some social protection, housing, education, medical care and retirement assistance (Blanc-Noël, 1997).

to the grave”, as it is often said. However, this political domination was exerted, as we have seen, in a minority government system resorting to coalitions, and in an egalitarian political culture, favoring the search for compromise. The SAP’s domination can only be understood in that frame. It is moreover the result of a double compromise on values, whose impact has been infinitely stronger than a simple game of political alliances.

The first axis of the compromise was the historical “red-green” compromise reached between the SAP and the Agrarian party. This compromise was more than a simple political strategy, it also was an important compromise on values. The Agrarian party accepted that economy would be managed by the public sphere whereas the SAP abandoned its revolutionary goal, the fight against capitalism, the nationalization of the means of production (replaced by the idea of a socially controlled market economy<sup>11</sup>), and it even abandoned class struggle. The SAP did not define itself as “the workers party” any more, but as the “people’s party”, which was a mark of the egalitarian pluralism we discussed above. A social-democrat economist, Gunnar Adler-Karlsson, called the Swedish social-democracy a “functional socialism”: a kind of socialism that had kept the goals of socialism, but that had chosen more sophisticated ways than the nationalization of the means of production to attain them (Adler-Karlsson, G. 1967). Market and capitalism were considered tools to develop national wealth. The goal was not to abolish capitalism, but on the contrary, to improve it. Taxation and redistribution were used to increase equality and build the welfare State up.

The second axis of compromise is more subtle, more implicit and less planned. It consisted in combining the SAP’s ideology to the older, traditional values of the Swedish society. The values of the SAP are the following (Tilton, 1992): first of all, the SAP has always had as an ideal the edification of an “integrative” democracy, to which everybody would be able to participate, a political as well as a social and economic democracy. Second, the SAP developed a vision of the *folkhem* society, as a “home for the whole people”, representing a universality value. Third, the SAP has always considered that equality can be combined to economic efficiency: social expenditures, according for instance to the Myrdals<sup>12</sup>, represent an investment in what is today called “human capital”. Such an investment is necessary to develop society (Sweden had to eradicate poverty that was still raging at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), and at the same time, it allows every individual to achieve its potential. Lastly, the SAP has combined a strong public sector, a strong State, and individual liberty: the ultimate goal of the welfare State was to free individuals.

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<sup>11</sup> The idea was that by bringing more equality in society through wage policy, taxation, welfare measures and economic planning, the Social-Democrats would be able to have markets meet basic human needs.

<sup>12</sup> Alva and Gunnar Myrdal were well-known “*philosophers of the Swedish social democracy*” (Tilton, 1990).

When the SAP appeared on the political scene, Swedish society was still mainly rural, Lutheran, and ethnically homogeneous. If one considers the social-democratic values mentioned above, that is to say inclusive and participative democracy, egalitarian and solidaristic *folkhem*, individual empowerment, universal social protection, efficient public policies and a strong State, it is easy to see all these values were already present in the ancient rural society. Indeed, the Swedish political culture has been deeply influenced by the absence of feudalism and the fact that peasantry was generally composed of free landowners (while peasants that did not own their land were also free). The peasantry had its own Estate in Parliament since the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This ancient society was less concerned than other European countries with social discrepancies, as it was mostly made up of peasants. Moreover, between 1860 and 1910, emigration allowed preventing social upheavals that could have burst out because of poverty. This social homogeneity favoured equality, solidarity and universalism, values that are still embodied in the modern social-democracy.

#### 4.2. A Lutheran, peasant cultural background

Lutheranism has deeply permeated ancient Sweden and its influence is still present, however in a more unconscious way. As a State religion, it reinforced the cohesion of Swedish society, given that the Reform was not the result of social divisions but was led by the State. The laws of the State and those of the Church were thus relevant from the same legal and moral code. Henrik Stenius has underlined how this explains the tendency to conformism in Scandinavian societies (Stenius, 1997). This culture of conformity naturally appealed to the setting up of a political system where consensus and compromise are favoured, and also expressed itself in the social-democratic discourse on universalist, egalitarian *folkhem*. Moreover, two emblematic concepts of the Swedish culture must be mentioned: the first is *lagom*, which refers to moderation and modesty that are considered necessary in society, as in the Swedish proverb “*lagom är bäst*” (the fair quantity is the best quantity, a moral version of “less is more”). The second is the Jante Law, who was formulated by a Norwegian writer, Axel Sandemose<sup>13</sup>, to criticize the tyranny of conformity in the Nordic peasant society (Auchet, 2004).

More generally, Lutheran ethics attributes dignity to the individual: every believer is a potential minister, a worthy citizen, responsible for his destiny. But this individual must get education, work for the common good, rationally and

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<sup>13</sup> Sandemose defined the Jante Law in his novel *A fugitive crosses his tracks* (*En flykting krysser sitt spor*, 1933). It is made of ten rules: 1. You're not to think you are anything special. 2. You're not to think *you* are as good as *us*. 3. You're not to think *you* are smarter than *us*. 4. You're not to convince yourself that *you* are better than *us*. 5. You're not to think *you* know more than *us*. 6. You're not to think *you* are more important than *us*. 7. You're not to think *you* are good at anything. 8. You're not to laugh at *us*. 9. You're not to think anyone cares about *you*. 10. You're not to think *you* can teach *us* anything.

pragmatically. So is the model citizen of the modern social-democracy (as praised in the Myrdals writings, for example). Moreover, Kurt Samuelsson showed the influence of various revivalist movements that flourished in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century in the setting up of democracy (Samuelson, 1968, p. 168). Some of them (Schartauanism<sup>14</sup>, laestadianism<sup>15</sup>, baptism) thought that if the individual can read the Bible, he can also express opinions; that is why the Baptist paper *Wexko-Posten*, for instance, militated for the universal suffrage. Samuelson also shows that the Temperance movement, beginning in the 1830s, had a deep political impact, acting as a popular education movement; many of its members later became members of unions and political parties. The cooperative movement (inspired by the British movement initiated by Robert Owen) played the same role from 1850. Lastly, the “popular high school movement”, initiated in Denmark by Nicolaj Grundtvig, a minister, was a very important popular education movement for adults. From 1868 on, it played a role in the building up of democracy, as it educated and “empowered” citizens, without departing from the teaching of Lutheran and traditional peasant values. Once again, the continuity between these movements and social-democracy is unquestionable. Lutheranism certainly did not lead to a condemnation of capitalism... Similarly, it is interesting to observe that, in the modern Swedish welfare State, work is praised as central value.

The historian Nina Witoszek (Witoszek, 1997) also remarked that Lutheran ethics was opposed to Romanticism and its idealism. She quotes the words of Grundtvig: “*We are not born to grandeur and magnificence, to stick to the earth will serve us best*”. Actually, the Swedish culture praised the free peasant, an active citizen, a producer for the nation, whose indignation sometimes aroused against injustice. According to Witoszek, when the 19th century liberalism established parliamentary democracy and the first elements of the welfare State, it found its inspiration in this ancient tradition. Later, such a culture logically conducted to socialism, “*almost tailor-made for the Scandinavian soul*” as “*it satisfied both endemic egalitarian aspirations and unconsummated Romantic cravings, it was anti-bourgeois and it promised to remedy the moral defects of a relatively late industrialization*”. The Swedish political culture is indeed deeply popular, centered on the peasantry. Another common stereotype links this characteristic to modern socialism, but actually, it dates back to monarchy, was endorsed by the Scandinavianist movement in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was naturally included in the social-democrat discourse in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. As Lars Trägårdh put it, a specificity of the Swedish (and Nordic) political culture is that the construction of modern democracy was a process of generalizing the political culture of the local peasant assembly, and not, as it was the case in many other countries, to democratize the culture of elites

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<sup>14</sup> From the name of Henric Shartau (1757-1825), a pietist minister, influent in South and South-East Sweden.

<sup>15</sup> From the name of Lars Laestadius (1800-1861), a Lutheran preacher, very influent in Lappland.

(Trägårdh, 1997). This can be explained by the fact that in the ancient four Estates Parliament, between the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was an alliance between the peasant Estate and the King against the nobility. As it possessed only about 1/10th of land, the gentleman class was not in position to exert a leading role, whereas free peasants, in the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, possessed about half of the land (Tilton, 1974). The nobility nevertheless considerably strengthened its position during the Thirty Years War, by doubling its landholdings, but from 1680, King Charles XI reduced them from about 72 % to 33 % of the realm, in exchange for recognition of its absolute power. Such a popular political culture, centered on peasant values, predisposed to an egalitarianism that developed with the edification of the welfare State. As the welfare State provided emancipatory education and social benefits to all citizens, in continuation of the High school movement, it ensured that all social classes were included in the “people’s home”, especially the more precarious ones: the poor, women, children, the handicapped, and later on ethnic minorities and immigrants.

Finally, the culture of the ancient peasant society predisposed to the development of a strong, interventionist State. As said above, the King had been allied with the peasantry against the nobility and the bourgeoisie. So, in the Swedish political culture, the State has always had a positive image. Lars Trägårdh wrote that it was “*the political genius*” of the social-democrats to resume this tradition after World War I, when they allied with the agrarians, by resuming both monarchic statism and peasant populism and by becoming the party of the State and the voice of the people’s movements (Trägårdh, 1997, p. 259). Hence, the State has then been regarded as legitimate, bearing the mission to eradicate poverty and privilege. It was then possible to develop a comprehensive welfare State, with an enormous public sector (even after the austerity measures taken during the last decade, public expenditures still represented 49.1 % of GNP in 2012), and to develop social engineering methods introduced by social-democrats.

## 5. Egalitarianism and individualism

A current stereotype about egalitarianism must be avoided: in Sweden, egalitarianism is not detrimental to the individual. As Prime Minister Tage Erlander once said, “*it is a mistake to believe that people’s freedom is diminished because they decide to carry out collectively what they are incapable of doing individually*” (quoted in Tilton, 1992, p. 419). Actually, individualism and collectivism do coexist in Swedish culture, even if it seems paradoxical at a first glance. This paradox has been measured in a 2007 study, “*Culture and Leadership Across the World*”, comparing 67 countries (Singh Chokar et al. 2008). Sweden ranked first for collectivist values, but had the lowest score concerning interpersonal relationships. Swedish individualism has been the subject of scientific studies, for instance by Åke Daun, who also showed that shyness, love for loneliness, independence, the will of avoiding conflicts are very developed along with individualism in Swedish society, but they nonetheless coexist with “collectivist” elements: “*Swedish culture*

*stresses sameness and conformity and plays down differences in encounters with others. When Swedes meet, they generally try to establish mutual understanding, accord, consensus, and friendliness. They seek topics of conversation that allow them to express similar views and experiences (...) This contrasts with the custom in many more heterogeneous countries, where people enjoy being with others very different from themselves: divergent opinions and experiences guarantee lively conversation*". Daun also writes that clubs, voluntary associations and study groups (comparatively very numerous in Sweden) play the same function of bringing harmony and cohesion. That is why popular movements (*folkrörelser*) had such an important impact in this country (Daun, 1999). Such a strong individualism, so well rooted in Swedish culture, has also been described by writers, artists, psychoanalysts, etc<sup>16</sup>. Lars Trägårdh analyses the impact of such individualism on politics; he remarks that the Swedish model is not statist in the socialist sense, but that it is rather an alliance concluded between the individual and the State: the "people's home" is thus a society made of atomized, autonomous individuals – at the same time craving for cooperation (Trägårdh, 1997). Peter Antman also observed that "*Few welfare States are as consistently based on the idea of individual autonomy as is the Swedish. Virtually all of our welfare programmes are tied to the individual person, not to the family or to the job as is the norm in other western countries... The struggle for full employment... follows the principle that each person should have power over his or her own life*" (Antman, 1994).

The paradox of this combination of a strong State with strong individualism can historically be explained by the alliance that was made between the king and the people; this explains why the State is considered to be benevolent and responsible for the people's well-being; State interventionism is based on that ground. Moreover, one of the fundamental goals of the welfare State is the emancipation of the individual. The intervention of the State is not made against the individual, but on the contrary, its objective is autonomy and empowerment of the individual. It has been mentioned above that this objective already was aimed at by Lutheranism and 19<sup>th</sup> century popular movements. It was also aimed at by Gustav Möller, who was the leader of the SAP between 1916 and 1940 and Minister of Social Affairs between 1924 and 1926 and 1932 and 1951, and one of the fathers of the Swedish welfare State and its social policy. When the Swedish model was established, Möller had the will to liberate the individual from private charity and from dependence to social workers (Rothstein, 2002). Thus, part of the mystery mentioned at the beginning of this paper finds an answer here: Sweden historically benefited from a cultural and political conjuncture that allowed her to combine, in a unique way shared with other Nordic countries, liberty and equality.

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<sup>16</sup> Lars Trägårdh gives many examples of them (Trägårdh, 1997).

## 6. An evolutionary conception of equality

A final point must be examined: talking of equality is almost a stereotype in itself, for actually, the Swedish understanding of equality has not always been the same in history. When Sweden became industrialized in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the principle of charity was replaced by the principle of universality, which stayed in place until the 1930s (Sejersted, 2011). According to this concept, citizens are equal, and all of them have the right to be helped in case of need. The general goal was social integration, for the nation needed to become unified and strong to be modernized. In the 1960s, the objective of modernization was considered to be accomplished: the welfare State was complete. But then the model began to face violent criticism: some did not find it enough developed, others, on the contrary, found it too oppressing for the individual. For instance, Olof Palme, an influent social-democrat politician who became a famous Prime minister, talked about “an authoritarian State” with equality of results as the main goal. The Social-democrats, then in government, tried to answer, first by taking more “social” measures. But in the 1980s, they made a radical shift in welfare thinking, and opted for reform and liberalization. That shift *“can be summarized as going from a principle of the greatest possible equality to a principle of the greatest possible freedom – freedom of choice”* (Sejersted, 2010, p. 429). Henceforth, the individual has the choice between several quality solutions, but there are no more ready-made solutions. The standardizing equality of results which was the core of the 1960s Swedish model tends to be replaced by a right to equality (Lindvall and Rothstein, 2006).

Nowadays, Swedish egalitarianism is debated. It is questioned by the evolution of society. The large family of the “people’s home” opened a window on the world and the rapid development of immigration constitutes a new challenge, to which the traditional discourse on the homogeneity of the people is not adapted. Sweden has looked for answers to this new challenge, and this effort was symbolized by the fundamental change written in the 1974 Constitution: with this text, Sweden shifted from its traditional national identity discourse, where it was depicted as the most homogeneous country in the world, to the acknowledgment of multiculturalism, and to the free choice, for immigrants, of their culture (Blanc-Noël, 2010). This meant that the concept of equality had changed: it had become closer to a right to equality that is, closer to other European countries’ conception of equality, and very different from the old concept of equality of result. In the 1990s, multiculturalism was considered not to have given sufficient answers to the social problems stemming from immigration. A new concept replaced multiculturalism - it was “diversity”, according to which Swedish citizens and immigrants must both make an effort to adapt to each other, while acknowledging the equality of all cultures. However, several sociologists, such as Charles Westin, underlined that Swedish immigration policies actually largely remain assimilationist, which is relevant to the

equality of result concept<sup>17</sup>. For the moment, Sweden seems to be hesitating between several conceptions of equality and is still in search for a new definition. It will have to adapt to the challenges of globalization, Europeanization, immigration, and to the economic crisis all welfare States are facing. But let us bet that the legendary inventiveness of the Swedish model will offer new original answers to these challenges...

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<sup>17</sup> The official goal of immigration policy is to “help immigrants becoming fully operational members of society” (Blanc-Noël, 2010).

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