

Chapter 2 : The autocracy

Sveär egho konung at taka ok sva vräka.
[Swedes have the right to both appoint &
depose their kings.]
Older Westgothia law c. 1219-1225.

In the scholastic tradition of c. 1000-1400, ancient authorities were often referred to as soon as discussion entered the monarchy's reason for existence: Aristotle, Plato, Polybius, et al. Monarchy was defined as autocracy for the common good. Democracy was defined as the rule of many for their own particular interests. The only thing worse than democracy was mob rule. However, the monarchies of Aristotle (small kingdoms governed by personal decrees) had few similarities with the later European 19th-century monarchies (bureaucratic behemoths governed by a law & a bureaucracy to implement it). New times required new ideas.

The political "classics" of the 16th century were Bodin's thoughts (1577) on *sovereignty* bound only by the laws of God and nature. The political classic of the 17th century was Hobbe's "Leviathan" (1651) of how the people would submit to an absolute monarch for their own good. 18th-century political classics included Montesquieu's "The Spirit of Law" (1748) (which advocated, among other things, a written constitution, separation of powers, and consideration of each country's political traditions), Blackstone's "Commentaries on the Laws of England" (1765) & Burke's "Reflections on the Revolution in France" (1790).

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Middle Ages

The early history of Sweden is poorly documented, but from the 11th century (?) the kings were elected by a council which met at Mora ting in Uppland. Then the election was approved by the king visiting of the landscape tings, on a so-called Eriksgata. The kings were elected for life, but the reign was often cut short due to premature death or forced abdication.

From 1250, Sweden was effectively a hereditary kingdom under the Folkunga dynasty. From c. 1280 there was a royal council. From 1290 a board of legal guardians until the regents maturity. Someone on this board seems to have translated the French royal mirror *De regimine principum* & adapted it to Swedish conditions. *A mirror for Kings and Chieftains* is the first Swedish example of scholastic political science. I quote from Lindroth's history of ideas:

"The wise Aristotle taught that man was a social creature, a "relational animal", and every society demanded a firm leadership - an autocratic king or prince, who was the agent of God, his "minister". The point open for discussion was the constitutional nature of the kingdom, hereditary or elective. The mirror energetically favours a hereditary kingdom ... As more than a man, the monarch must make his life more godly and virtuous than others, as both Aristotle and Solomon knew. Unshakable justice and firmness must be his goal, he must be generous, humble and faithful, under his sceptre everybody - be he knights, peasant or worker - would enjoy law and justice, peace and security. Here is the good king of Augustine, the opposite of the tyrant.

...

[Other authorities are quotes from the works of Thomas Aquinas] (including his partly genuine state science, *De regno*), a treatise on the virtues attributed to a 6th-century bishop Martin but mostly embracing Stoic moral philosophy. In addition, canonical and Roman law, the inevitable Augustine and "about the twelve abuses", attributed to the church father Cyprian and filled with the spirit of Augustine."¹

In conclusion: A moral king, an autocratic government and a hereditary kingdom. The specific Swedish requirements seems to have been for literacy, a courteous behaviour and fulfilling their civil, domestic and military duties.

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The Golden Age of Empire

In the Middle Ages, the monarchy was debated with religious arguments. In the 17th century, the secular "natural law" arguments took over. It was taken for granted that everyone had their birthrights, which must be curtailed by the government in the interest of society. The poles of the debate were the above-mentioned Jean Bodin who advocated the absolute personal sovereignty of the monarch over his subjects & the opposite, the ideological trend "Monarkomakerne", who with arguments of natural law sought to defend the rights of the subjects. The compromise became the theory of the "social contract" - that the people in their own interest delegated their naturally given power to the *sovereign*, but in return demanded guarantees that he kept to the contract. The great names in the debate about the consequences of the social contract are the German Johannes Althusius (1557-1638), the Dutch Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the Englishman Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and the Swedish-German Samuel von Pufendorf (1632-1694). However, it took some time for the theory to have a Swedish impact:

"The age was in the habit of illustrating the secrets of statecraft with examples culled from the Bible and ancient historians such as Herodotus, Polybius and Livy. Now as in the middle ages Aristotle was adapted to contemporary problems. His investigation in *Politics* of the three forms of government monarchy, aristocracy and democracy was a concern throughout the 17th century. In his visit to Uppsala University in 1637, Axel Oxenstierna praised Aristotle as the most excellent of political writers and emphasized, that the Aristotelian ethics provided the firm basis for the philosophy of state and law; the link between political science and moral science was considered firm and unshakable."²

The reason for the delay of the impact was probably that the theory of the social contract was long perceived as smashing open doors. Sweden was in the terminology of the time a so-called mixed monarchy "where the prince in his regiment was in some way bound by the consent of the people - the council and the estates."³ The natural law theories legitimized the state of things, but in substance amounted to nothing new. All Swedes had the same rights, although some - the king, the Privy Council & the nobility - had been delegated more rights than others. For the king this was justified by the doctrine of...

¹ Lindroth 1975a: ss. 100-101.

² Lindroth 1975b: s. 353.

³ Lindroth 1975b: s. 354.

”... the double majesty and the fundamental laws. The doctrine of ”double majesty” meant that power was thought to be divided between king and subjects. The ”real” power (*majestas realis*) lay with the people, the prince owned only a ”personal”, temporary power (*majestas personalis*). And this was regulated by the so-called fundamental laws by which they were meant the oaths, assurances and other statutes, which he had undertaken to abide by upon his taking power.”⁴

[The five fundamental laws were the Lutheran Creed, the order of succession, the oath of accession, the 1634 form of government and the decisions of the Estates. According to the lawyers Loccenius (1598-1677) & Wexionius (1583-1651), the form of government was intended to protect the principle of the separation of powers.]

Under Queen Christina & later, great efforts were made by ”cherry picking” & angled quotes to turn natural law in an absolutist direction. According to Lindroth most successful in this endeavour was the Swedish-German Samuel von Pufendorf who advocated an almost unrestricted autocracy in the spirit of Bodin & Hobbes:

”The king's will was by its very nature law identical to the will of the state. Whoever held the supreme power (*summum imperium*) ruled at his discretion and was not obliged to account for his work to any mortal. Moreover he or she was surrounded by a special ”holiness”. The natural law was intended to subdue human nature, where lay the paradox of Hobbes' and Pufendorf's doctrines of state. Indisputable to both of them, as to the age in general, was the concept of Order; human society as well as the universe as a whole was subject to unchanging norms [=state science was physics, mathematics & logic rather than politics].”⁵

[The consequences of Pufendorf's doctrine for the monarchy varies according to who describes his theories. He seems to me to be a milder version of Hobbes, but natural law - even Pufendorf's diluted version - can obviously be used to justify anything.]

Pufendorf's work is considered to be the most important (=most influential) scientific work of the era, but that he, like Hobbes, detached political science from a Christian moral philosophy, aroused tremendous opposition, and it took time for his theories to be accepted. The Carolean autocracy was in any case not a social treaty but an autocracy by the grace of God: In 1680, Charles XI freed himself from the restrictions of the constitution. In 1682, he took over all legislation, including the power of taxation. In 1689, all criticism became *Lèse-majesté*. In 1693 he was described as an ”autocratic sovereign”, ”not accountable for his actions” to anybody on this earth. The limited monarchy (*monarchia limitata*) was temporarily lying fallow.

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Age of Liberty

In the 18th century, natural law regained its status, but its application was different: the people were the Sovereign & the Society Contract now a weapon against despotism. The Swedish Age of Liberty was a living illustration of the political consequences: In 1719

⁴ Lindroth 1975b: ss: 357-358.

⁵ Lindroth 1975b: s. 365.

representatives of a free people gathered for an assembly, agreed upon the form of government and concluded a treaty that was unfavourable to Queen Ulrika Eleonora. The inspiration is believed to have been the English Glorious Revolution of 1688-1689 and its spokesman John Locke (1632-1704) through his work "Two treaties on government" (1690):

"When all real power (majestas) with a radical decision was placed in the Estates, it meant that the eternally valid standards of natural law were enforced; the people were the holders of power and could give it to whoever or to whom it wanted. It has been said, that both a social and a ruling contract according to all rules of political art are contained in the 1719 form of government. Its propagandist, David Silvius, developed further the contract theory according to Grotius and Pufendorf but it was probably also influenced by the constitutional, natural and legal traditions of English law. Locke among others. When in 1723 the new constitution was attacked by advocates of a monarchic restoration, the Chancellery published the second of Locke's Two Treatises on civil government in a Swedish translation (On the Worldly Government's Origin, Limits and Purpose). The judgment of the rebels was also a severe rebuttal of the overthrown theocratic system of government, according to which the kingship granted by God. The radical Pufendorfian Christian Thomasius in Halle his arguments in support of popular sovereignty; under natural law all political power had its source there."⁶

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The Gustavian restoration

The 18th century saw the coming of Enlightenment. Here we only mention Montesquieu (1689-1755) & Rousseau (1712-1788). Montesquieu made his name through "The Spirit of Law" (1748), Rousseau through "The Social Contract" (1762). Montesquieu's ideas of a balance of power could, like natural law, be interpreted in several ways: The 1772 coup d'état was motivated by the need to strengthen royal power so that a "proper" balance existed between King, Privy Council & Estates. The fact that Gustav III, not the Estates, was called upon to implement the change was due to the fact that according to the 1544 order of succession he had inherited his crown, that according to Pufendorf's interpretation of natural law the social treaty that his father had sworn to follow did not apply after his death, but that he himself in the manner of Gustav II Adolf was subject only to God and his laws. The mixed monarchy was thus 1772 given a temporary reprieve, but 1789 abolished by the the "Union and Security Act" which gave Gustav III and the son Gustaf IV almost unlimited opportunities to circumvent the Parliament. In addition to the Realpolitik, there were also some *physiocratic* sophistry by his teacher Carl Fredrik Schaeffer (1715-1786) who motivated the reintroduced autocracy by...

"... there is no property without freedom and no freedom without security. It is in the interests of security, freedom and property that society has supreme power. The task of the supreme power is to interpret the laws. The most important laws are nature's own laws. As a physiocrat, Schaeffer imagined some eternal, in nature inherent laws of reason: "The laws of society which are established by the highest being merely prescribe the preservation of the proprietary rights [ownership], and of freedom, which are inseparable from them. The decrees of the supreme power, which can be called positive laws, should be nothing more than actions, which to everyone's knowledge

⁶ Lindroth 1975c: ss. 532-533.

and compliance impose essential laws on the social order.” He continues: ”The supreme power in a society is bound by positive laws to make the natural and essential laws of the social order available and she alone has the right to fulfil this valuable duty.” Scheffer's physiocratic conviction became even more evident in the speech he made in the Academy of Sciences in 1772 On the Nature of the Law. That speech can be considered a defence of Gustaf's coup d'état.”⁷

More specific: In 1772, Gustav III was able to exploit the fear within the nobility that the party divisions (in hats, caps, ”court party” & various pressure groups) to the extent had weakened Sweden that it in the manner of Poland would end with the division of the country. In 1789, he was able to use the conflicts between the Estates to restore the Carolean autocracy. In exchange for the recognition of the ”Union and Security Act”, the peasant & burgher estates received a number of privileges: The nobility's preference for government services was abolished and the peasants were granted the ownership of their land & the right to buy (tax-free) farmland. The peasants and the non noble state officials considered themselves from that day and at least until the 1914 peasant march as having a special relationship with the royal house.

To make yourself an enemy of the nobility was not a good idea. In 1792, Gustav III was killed by a noble freedom fighter, the less than stellar performance of the noble officers during the Finnish War of 1808-09 brought about a Polish division of the country and in 1809 Gustaf IV (again on behest of the nobility) was forced to abdicate. Since the 1809 revolution, the supposed Swedish equivalent of the bourgeois French revolution, was a noble counter-revolution, there has always been some confusion about how to interpret it.⁸

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The aftermath

Since King Gustav III was supported by the commoners, a mythology arose (or rather was hawked by state loyalists) that the king in conjunction with the people had freed the country from the nobles oppression. Not surprisingly, the newly formed Swedish Academy had a central role in the propaganda. Members considered it to be part of their mission. This was combined with a headless tribute by Gustav Vasa:

To understand why Gustav Vasa embodies ”the nation”, one must go a hunting in the works of Dalin and other enlightenment historians. It turns out that what Dalin, Wilde, Botin and Lagerbring do is not just to develop a new view of the nation in general. It is also about a political story about the nation that has perhaps been stronger than anyone else in Swedish history writing, and which can be summarized as follows: *The national (or ”public”) best is a true union between king and people, and the periods when Swedish history has been truly national and served ”the public” is when king and people have acted as a man*, while the national periods that have been pernicious to ”the public” are when the union between king and people has been broken by divisive actors (who almost always serve alien and/or ”foreign” interests).

”The supreme power”, says Botin in his history, ”has from Sweden's first day on earth resided with the Swedish People in general”. It is therefore not strange that Botin writes ”The History of the *Swedish People*”, but it must be pointed out that he is the

⁷ Segerstedt 1986a: s. 10.

⁸ Kan 1974; Hall 2000: ss. 99-106; Nordin 2000 & 2009; Wolff 2008.

very first to do this. According to Botin, the Swedes in ancient times lived under a free constitution, where the king's power was limited by the people and first and foremost by the peasants. If anyone trampled on this freedom they were enraged, and had their tribunes (the lawmen) speak to the king on their behalf. The laws were thus an expression of the will of the people (Wilde and Dalin hold similar views). Here we can clearly see the influence of the ancient Republicanism on the New Republicanism, whose most famous representative during the Enlightenment was Montesquieu.

But in the Middle Ages, this ancient freedom of the people and balance between king and people had been displaced, and the agent of this was first and foremost the Catholic Church.”⁹

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The description above emphasizes the continuity of the Swedish monarchic system. The alternative description is that Sweden 1563-1865 alternated between two political systems: “People's State” (=autocracy supported by the non noble estates) & “Government by Committee” (=weak ruler or guardianship; de facto a republic dominated by nobles); which has left deep marks on the political landscape right up to the modern era. (See also chapter 7.)

A third interpretation is that the guardianship governments and the frequent dynastic changes prevented a continental development into absolute monarchy. The Dynasties never had time to establish themselves until it was over.

⁹ Hall 2000: ss. 99-100.

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