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### From the Swedish Model to the Open Society: The Swedish Power Investigation and the Power to Investigate Power, 1985-1990

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# From the Swedish Model to the Open Society: The Swedish Power Investigation and the Power to Investigate Power, 1985–1990

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**ABSTRACT** *This article analyses the background, activities and reception of the Swedish power investigation (1985–1990). It argues that the power investigation had to navigate between two distinct expectations: on the one hand, the investigation was to expose private power in the interest of equality and justice; on the other hand, it was to improve the exercise of public power in the interest of democracy and efficiency. Because of this two-fold objective, the power investigation was criticised for having neither disclosed private power openly enough, nor pointed out possible ways of adequately rejuvenating welfare state policies clearly. However, the article concludes that one may also assess the power investigation insofar as it served to reconceptualise the socio-political language of welfare state politics in general, as a result of the power inherent in the right to investigate power.*

**KEY WORDS:** power investigation, welfare state criticism, Swedish model, open society

After decades of continuous economic growth and ambitious social reforms, the Swedish welfare state came under increasing criticism in the 1970s for being bureaucratic, inefficient and even undemocratic. Much of this criticism, voiced from the left and the right, as well as from the emerging environmental movement, focused upon the supposedly corporatist elements of the Swedish welfare state model (Ehnmark and Enquist 1987; Frenander 1998; Mellbourn 1986; Wiklund 2006).

More specifically, however, the criticism turned against the alleged hegemony of the Swedish Social Democratic Workers' Party (*Sveriges socialdemokratiska arbetareparti*; SAP) as the main architect of the welfare state. Social democracy was being accused of having become too powerful during its long period in office (1932–1976). Leading social democrats, by contrast, perceived themselves as less powerful than before, feeling themselves increasingly tied down by both the external pressures of the world economy as well as the internal power structures of the corporatist and increasingly complex Swedish welfare state model itself.

Several political scientists agreed with this characterisation, concluding that the traditional 'independence' of Swedish authorities from direct governmental influence had made it more

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difficult to exercise political power (Mellbourn 1986; Tarschys 1978). The incoming bourgeois government of 1976 also shared this experience (Åsling 2001). The Swedish welfare state, which earlier had been widely regarded as a highly efficient organisation for social change, appeared to have reached a point of satiation and political inertia.

The present article tracks how these concerns—voiced by both the left and the right—translated into calls for an official investigation on the shifting preconditions for power. More specifically, it examines how these calls resulted in the launch of the Study of Power and Democracy in Sweden (*Utredningen om maktfördelning och demokrati i Sverige*) called *Maktutredningen* for short (henceforth ‘the power investigation’). The background, activities and reception of the power investigation are analysed, from its beginning in 1985 to the delivery of its final report five years later, in 1990.

The power investigation had to negotiate two distinct expectations. On the one hand, it had a clear political mandate for ‘exposing’ private power in the interest of equality and justice. On the other, it was also implicitly tasked with studying ways of improving the exercise of public power in the interest of democracy and efficiency. Largely on account of this two-fold objective, the power investigation was criticised by some in the early 1990s for not having disclosed private power openly enough, while others complained that it had not shown how welfare state policies might be adapted to the challenges of globalisation and individualisation.

However, the lasting impact of the investigation should not be evaluated with regard to these two aspects alone, but must also be assessed for its role in reconceptualising the socio-political language of welfare state politics more generally. By probing new vocabularies of public service, participation and openness, the power investigation called attention to new ways of speaking about the welfare state. These vocabularies could be used to transcend the traditional dichotomies of past welfare state debates, often phrased in counter-concepts such as equality or efficiency, planning or liberty. The power investigation outlined a new self-understanding for the Swedish political elite, pointing away from the supposedly conformist, corporatist ‘Swedish model’ towards a more dynamic, flexible and participatory ‘open society’ (SOU 1990:44). Through its shaping of academic and public views of the Swedish welfare state, the power investigation exemplifies the power inherent in the right to investigate power.

### **Welfare State Criticism: From the Strong Society to the Concrete Society**

During its most expansive phase in the 1960s and 1970s, SAP chairman and Swedish Prime Minister (1948–1969) Tage Erlander’s dual concepts of *det starka samhället* (‘the strong society’) and *valfrihetens samhälle* (‘the freedom of choice society’) served as the primary guiding principles of the Swedish welfare state (Erlander 1962; 1976; Lindgren 2010). According to the first phrase, the state needs to be powerful enough to compensate for structural inequalities in society in order to bring about social security. Such compensation should be provided universally by means of progressive taxation and the generous provision of welfare, thereby facilitating true freedom of choice for as many citizens as possible. Sweden’s success was often understood as a result of this policy of explicit social investment that sought to promote economic growth, together with social security (Andersson 2006; Erlander 1962; Myrdal 1960; Tingsten 1966).

While the reform policies were largely implemented by social democratic governments, they were typically processed through state committees in which opposition parties,

popular movements, trade unions and relevant authorities were represented in a manner considered characteristic of the Scandinavian political system (Anton 1980; Aylott 2014; Elder, Arter, and Thomas 1982). While the welfare state sought to cope with the ‘dissatisfaction of unsatisfied expectations’, as Erlander (1962, 60) had called it in 1956, the pressure not only to provide better social security and more social welfare, but to do so in a more cost-efficient manner, motivated wide-scale ‘structural rationalisation’ of the Swedish economy, which in turn generated far-ranging social change.

Structural rationalisation enjoyed broad public support across the political spectrum. Yet, this consensus did not necessarily reflect the opinion of all groups, in particular the views of younger voters. Many were concerned with both the lingering shortcomings of Swedish society as well as the new risks posed by the modern welfare state. By the early 1970s, social scientists began to report on rising anti-establishment attitudes and declining membership in civil society organisations. A critical counter-concept emerged in opposition to the notion of the strong society, *betongsamhället*, ‘the concrete society’, indicating a cold, inflexible and sterile social environment, far removed from the ideals of care and equality held up by the welfare state. The strong society no longer appeared automatically conducive to freedom of choice as in Erlander’s original conception (Almqvist and Glans 2001; Frenander 1998; Mellbourn 1986; Östberg 2009; Wiklund 2006).

Noting the growing criticism against the welfare state, leading social democrats such as Hans Esping and Måns Lönnroth concluded that social democracy ran the risk of ending up in ‘an unfortunate defensive position’ as a result of bourgeois parties trying to exploit popular dissatisfaction with ‘power’ that cut across the political spectrum (Åkerman 1969; Anners 1976; Esping and Lönnroth 1976, 14; Ortmark 1967). The SAP responded in the 1976 elections by promising a further expansion of the welfare state to promote social equality through economic democracy, but it lost to a bourgeois alliance for the first time in 44 years.

In the post-electoral analysis that followed the defeat, Rune Molin, Secretary of the traditionally social democrat Swedish Trade Union Confederation (*Landsorganisationen i Sverige*; LO), argued that long-term responsibility for the administration of the country will of necessity result in conflicts with various groups, who hold ‘social democracy responsible for problems in advanced industrial society which really result from capitalism and lack of control over development’ (1976, 370). Following the 1976 election, surveys conducted by political scientist Olof Petersson also showed that ‘bureaucracy’ and the unwieldy, impersonal and often anonymous state apparatus had been a decisive factor in the outcome of the elections, together with the political scandals that preceded the election, indicating power corruption and influential networks among the political elite (Gilljam and Nilsson 1984; Mellbourn 1986, 11 ff.; Petersson 1977, 199 ff.).<sup>1</sup>

Prior to the elections, Esping and Lönnroth had suggested that ‘the party must treat the relationship between the citizens, the elected politicians, and the administration seriously’. In a motion made at the annual meeting of the Stockholm Labour Commune in 1976, they proposed that a specific investigation be launched to this end—one of the first suggestions of what would eventually become the power investigation (1976, 13 ff.).

### **A Forest of Red Pins: Who Has Power?**

In the post-election analysis, social democrats often raised the problem of private power in the welfare state, especially through the media. This had also been emphasised in the new, more radical party programme of 1975 (SAP 1975). Molin concluded that the bourgeois

victory would lead to ‘a terrible power concentration of political, economic and media power in the same place’. But, he continued, this might not be entirely negative, as it might make more ‘visible how economic power is in reality guilty of things social democracy has been blamed for’ (1976, 375).

The incoming bourgeois government would also experience the limits of political power. Some critics argued that, while in opposition, the bourgeois parties had lost contact with important private power networks and organised social interests (Åsling 2001; Elvander 1966; Hermansson 1965). Others claimed that when those parties entered the corridors of power, they had been met by ‘a forest of red pins’, that is, a thoroughly politicised corps of civil servants, adjusted to social democratic ideals, whether they be members of SAP or not (Levin 1983). The criticism seemed to suggest that the social democrats somehow remained responsible, even when no longer in power (Enzensberger 1982; Gustafsson 1989).

The post-defeat social democrats mostly remained unrepentant, throwing this accusation back at the critics. The relative independence of the Swedish authorities, as laid out in the Constitution, meant that the government—social democratic or otherwise—could exercise little direct power over public administration. The social democratic response claimed that the SAP had sought precisely to avoid politicising the public administration. As a consequence of such moderation, the Swedish administrative bureaucracy had become a refuge for bourgeois civil servants with conservative world views and deeply entrenched power networks (Esping and Lönnroth 1976; Persson and Haste 1984).

Nevertheless, some prominent social democrats felt that there was some truth to the criticism. Party Secretary Bo Toresson, for example, noted that

We social democrats have been organisation freaks . . . . Many of the reforms we implemented . . . did not bring expected results. People did not recognise what we have said about planning legislation and social insurances when the ideas were translated into practical reality. (Toresson, as quoted in Persson and Haste 1984, 66)

Social democrats also perceived a genuine and growing tension between the demands for public services on the one hand and the calls for democracy and freedom of choice on the other. This tension emerged from an imbalance between Erlander’s guiding principles of the welfare state, as for example Lennart J. Lundqvist noted:

The ambitious welfare state seems trapped in a structural dilemma. The more you wish to place the emphasis on *performance*, i.e., the thorough and efficiently implemented provision of services, the more difficult it becomes to maintain the norm of *participation*, i.e., the demand for broad popular involvement in policy making and popular control of the implementation of decisions. The more that citizens share in welfare, the less they seem to share the democratic responsibility for the development of welfare. The larger the public sector, the more the citizens run the risk of becoming its clients rather than its controllers. (Lundqvist 1978, 365)

Ensuring the quality of the welfare state’s performance would result in increasing dependence upon experts and complex non-personal systems, Lundqvist warned, running the risk of alienating and disenfranchising citizens.

Increasingly, the *styrproblem* ('steering problems') or *styrningsgapet* ('the steering gap') in the Swedish welfare state was experienced by both the social democrats and the bourgeois parties (Rothstein 1984). The question arose as to how any future government—bourgeois or social democratic—could avoid being blamed for things they were not responsible for, while at the same time wielding enough power over the public administration to implement the mandate of the electorate. A second question also arose: Who has usurped public power and how can it be taken back?

The bourgeois government answered this query in 1979 by placing liberal politician and political scientist Daniel Tarschys in charge of the Government Committee on Public Policy Planning (*Förvaltningsutredningen*), which was given the task of probing ways to improve the control and efficiency of public administration (SOU 1983:39). In 1983, the Centre for Business and Policy Studies (*Studieförbundet Näringsliv och Samhälle*; SNS) followed up by publishing two ambitious and well-received books that sought to analyse the failure of the bourgeois governments, telling a tale of systemic inertia and innovation difficulties of the Swedish model (Arvedson, Hägg, and Rydén 1983; Rydén 1983).<sup>2</sup> This critique should be placed in the context of the more ambitious attempt since the late 1970s, by organised business interests to use think tanks, research centres and publishing houses to present a different story about the rise and fall of the Swedish model than the previously dominant social democratic narrative (Boréus 1994).

Unwilling to let bourgeois parties score political points by exploiting the perception that state power had been usurped, social democrats eventually responded by taking their own initiative to launch a power investigation (Mellbourn 1986, 13; Persson and Haste 1984; Svensson 1993).

### The Calls for a Power Investigation

The idea of a power investigation had already been raised before the 1976 elections (Esping and Lönnroth 1976, 14). However, not until the early 1980s were these demands expressed in the *Riksdag*. In a parliamentary debate on 30 November 1983 concerning certain constitutional questions, communist MP Jörn Svensson and social democrat MP Olle Svensson found themselves in agreement on the need for the political establishment to find a better way of steering the administration so that their political decisions achieved the desired results in society (*Riksdagens protokoll* 1983/84:36, 6§, Anf. 25, 26). Svensson went on to explain that knowledge was lacking about this key issue of democracy, but that Tarschys' (1978) research had proven that:

“An autonomous [*självstyrande*, literally ‘autocratic,’ as distinct from the positively-coded *självständig*, e.g. ‘independent’] administration cannot be the ideal. With too weak a government, we run the risk of ending up in a situation that the Norwegian power investigation has described as public governance without political control. (*Riksdagens protokoll* 1983/84:36, 6§, Anf. 26).”

On 11 January 1984, C. H. Hermansson, the long-standing chairman of the communist Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet kommunisterna*; VPK), put a motion before the *Riksdag* which claimed power had become more and more concentrated in Swedish society through the centralisation of public administration, business and organised social interest groups, while the *Riksdag* had lost power to the government. As a consequence, the distance

between the governed and those who govern had increased. The individual citizen had become more and more isolated from political decision making. Noting that private power was described as growing in concentration while public power was assumed to be dispersing, Hermansson argued that these contradictory accounts of power relations in Swedish society necessitated a thorough analysis through a dedicated power investigation akin to the Norwegian power investigation that had delivered its final report in 1982 (Motion 1983/84:334).

In treating Hermansson's motion in October 1984, the Committee on the Constitution (*Konstitutionsutskottet*; KU) described the issues as 'important'. Nevertheless, it declared that such a power investigation would not be 'purposive', as the problems outlined in Hermansson's motion had either already been or were in the process of being studied by a number of other governmental investigations. Hence, the KU declined the motion in a decision on 8 October 1984 (KU 1984/85:5).

In January 1985, Hermansson and the Left Party returned with a renewed request for a power investigation (Motion 1984/85:290). Hermansson emphasised that a number of representatives of parties and organised social interests on the left and the right had expressed their support for a power investigation based on the Norwegian model, and there had been two parliamentary motions by the liberal People's Party (*Folkpartiet*; FP) and the SAP (Motion 1984/85:1508, 1984/85:473). However, Hermansson envisioned a parliamentary committee, rather than a scientific research group like the Norwegian power investigation (Motion 1984/85:290).

These motions were treated by the KU in a report to the Committee on Education on 28 March 1985. In a reversal of its previous standpoint, the KU now proposed that these issues needed to be researched. The KU explained that the government recently had declared that it would appoint a power investigation whose aim would be to map power in business, civil authorities, organisations and mass media and determine how public and private interests are 'interwoven' through these power relations. According to the KU, the Left Party MP's demands had thus already been met by the government's initiative to establish this scientific project. However, the communist member of the KU filed a minority report arguing that it would be essential in order to guarantee democratic control of the study to establish a parliamentary committee, including representatives of organised interests, rather than a scientific research group (KU 1984/85:7y).

### **The Power Investigation, 1985–1990**

On 24 March 1985, only four days before the treatment of Hermansson's above-mentioned motion in the KU, Vice Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson announced at a district conference of the Swedish Social Democratic Youth League (*Sveriges socialdemokratiska ungdomsförbund*; SSU) in Södertälje that the government would appoint a power investigation. This investigation would be conducted by 'qualified and independent researchers' over a relatively long period 'since one cannot uncover all the ramifications of power overnight', as he told the audience of young social democrats.<sup>3</sup>

In the spring of 1985, these seemingly academic questions were directly linked to the political contest between social democracy and an increasingly self-assertive bourgeois opposition that SAP leader Olof Palme warned would represent a *systemskifte* ('systemic shift') away from the Swedish model in favour of neo-liberalism of the Thatcherite kind (Anell and Carlsson 1985; Elmbrant 1989; 1993; Korpi and Åberg 1985; Östberg 2009).

As Carlsson emphasised in Södertälje, the prospect of such a shift made the task of the power investigation critical to the future of Swedish politics.<sup>4</sup>

The directives or terms of reference for the investigation were established on 27 June 1985, and Carlsson informed the media on 28 June 1985 that the government had decided to appoint a committee of inquiry, whose task was to study the distribution of power and democracy in Sweden. In a press release on that day, Carlsson explained that the power investigation would be facing an enormous task, since power was one of the most pervasive, yet most contested concepts of the social sciences. Nevertheless, the main question would be simple and direct. ‘Who has power—and why? And how can more people get a real chance to decide not only about their own lives, but about social development as a whole, too?’ The investigation would not only influence social science research and debate, ‘but the entire political life. It is really about the fact that we want to deepen knowledge of the preconditions of democracy.’<sup>5</sup> Three main questions were singled out:

1. The distribution of power and the influence of the citizenry.
2. Power and influence within four delimited areas of society: business, the public sector, organisations, and public opinion.
3. Are citizens’ opportunities for insight and control increasing?<sup>6</sup>

The terms of references for the investigation had been drawn up by Måns Lönnroth (Dir 1985, 36).<sup>7</sup> Lönnroth had been one of the first to call for a power investigation in 1976 and had since studied energy policies at the Swedish Secretariat for Future Studies. The directives were heavily influenced by the idea that power had become more *otydlig* (‘opaque’, ‘obscure’, ‘unclear’), making it more difficult to prove causality, assign accountability and govern society in general. This was becoming a crucial problem for democratic welfare state governance in the post-industrial age, particularly in view of individualisation and internationalisation.

The experts conducting the power investigation were to analyse the relationship between administration, business and interest organisations—‘iron triangles’, as they were called in Norway—and the entanglement between the public and private sectors. The formation of public opinion was also to be studied. Carlsson urged that the power investigation function as an expert commission whose findings would form the basis for parliamentary decisions. In his press release, Carlsson noted that the problem of power looked different, depending upon one’s political and ideological views. For this reason, the experts had been selected on the basis of their scientific competence and not on account of their political values. Carlsson said that other researchers whose work addressed power structures in Swedish society, but who would not be included in the power investigation, should not feel disadvantaged, as they too would be better able to contribute their research findings once the investigation was under way.

The task of coordinating arrangements for the power investigation fell to the Prime Minister’s Office. Soon after the press release, political scientist Olof Petersson, well-known for his statistical surveys and analysis of the election results in 1976, was assigned to lead the power investigation. Petersson was later joined by economist Inga Persson (later Persson-Tanimura), Norwegian political scientist Johan P. Olsen, and historian Yvonne Hirdman.<sup>8</sup>

At a time when the Swedish system of committees came under pressure to cut spending and deliver reports at a faster pace than before, the power investigation not only stands out



for the scale of its commitment with a budget of 33 million SEK over five years, but also with regard to the unorthodox disbursement of those means. The government decided on 27 February 1986 that the investigation's budgetary allocation was to be managed by Uppsala University. The project was scheduled to conclude in the summer of 1990, one year before the national elections in 1991.<sup>9</sup>

The output of the investigation was impressive and corresponded to the resources directed at the task. Over time, 142 social science researchers were connected to the project—the list of collaborators reads like a *Who's Who* of Swedish social science at the time—resulting in 125 publications of various kinds (SOU 1990:44, 427–44). The main publications range from traditional sociological surveys on the recruitment, education, living conditions and opinions of citizens and elites, to classical political science studies of party politics, political behaviour and public administration. For example, the Katrineholm Study followed up on earlier Swedish sociological research in tracking the microcosm of a middle-sized Swedish town that could be seen as representative of the country as a whole (Åberg 1990). Other studies sought to chart, for example, private ownership in Swedish industry and the contact network of government officials (Eidem and Skog 1991; Petersson 1989b), while an advertised study of 'the Swedish power elite' failed to materialise (SOU 1990:44, 430).

However, the power investigation possibly served its most important role as an incubator for innovative forms of research on topics little known previously. Empirically and theoretically innovative approaches included, for example, the study of the discrimination of women and immigrants (Ålund and Schierup 1991; Hirdman 1988; Persson 1990), language and metaphors for society and power (Petersson 1987a, b, 1989a), the introduction as well as criticism of organisational theory and new management forms in public administration (Brunsson 1989; Brunsson and Olsen 1990; Czarniawska-Joerges 1988), and the increasingly important role of media for Swedish politics and society (Petersson and Carlberg 1990). Research into the historical origins and outcomes of Swedish consensual welfare state politics had a long-lasting impact, most notably political scientist Rothstein's (1988) study of Swedish corporatism and Hirdman's (1989) volume on 'social engineering' and 'Swedish people's home politics'.

The power investigation also helped to create national and international networks between social scientists, while familiarising a whole generation of social scientists with broad trends in their disciplines, research project management and transdisciplinary collaboration. Thus, it contributed to a panoptic, yet kaleidoscopic, image of Swedish society, which in its parts dealt with widely different aspects of social life, but taken together composed a sweeping portrait of sometimes conflicting, sometimes complementary, yet distinctly new, narratives about the nation, the welfare state and challenges ahead.

### **Not Seeing the Wood for the Trees: Where Is Power?**

"But where is power? Who is responsible? The government blames the mistakes of the previous government. The previous government, in its turn, points to the economy. Are the businessmen therefore to blame? No, they answer, business freedom is being constrained, they answer. Now the trade unions and the state govern. But the politicians are less able to survey things and govern, claiming to be more and more dependent upon civil servants and the bureaucracy. But civil servants and trade unionists reject the

accusation and point to all the decisions being made above their heads . . . . Thus the chain of guilt rattles away. Power is everywhere, but also nowhere. No one wants to be associated with power.” (Pettersson and Hirdman 1985, 2).

Cited above is chief power investigator Olof Petersson’s description of the elusive character of the object of study in the autumn of 1985. It not only illustrates the complexity of the task before the power investigation, but also reflects the unwillingness to shoulder responsibility in a complex society. One senses a genuine bewilderment and uncertainty on the part of actors and scholars concerning the causal relations in society. Finally, it echoes the working hypothesis of ‘obscure power’, as expressed in the directives that guided the power investigation and was confirmed in its final report entitled *Demokrati och makt i Sverige* (Democracy and Power in Sweden; SOU 1990:44).

While generally in agreement with the emerging trend in Swedish social science and humanities towards social constructivism, the power investigation’s confirmation of the theory of obscure power came as a disappointment to some. The left had suspected that private power and matching conservative power elites in the ‘bourgeois’ public administration and private business dominated Swedish society, while those on the right believed that public power and a kind of leftist power elite had ‘politicised’ public administration and popular movements. However, the power investigation now found that public and private power elites existed side by side in Sweden and that by balancing each other, the two had been generally beneficial for the largely consensual development of Swedish political culture and the Swedish welfare society.

The power investigation received considerable coverage in national media as can be seen in its press archive. The media generally concentrated upon three aspects. First, commentators discussed whether it had been legitimate for the Government to commission a study of power at all, and whether the investigation’s findings could be seen as objective. Second, most journalists concluded that the power investigation had proven that the era of Swedish exceptionalism had ended, and that internationalisation would increasingly have to be taken into account in national policymaking. Third, most commentators agreed with the concluding report that the Swedish model had now finally become obsolete (SOU 1990:44, 407). Still, they disagreed on the features that had distinguished this social configuration and whether the change that had taken place presented a window of opportunity or a closed door for future political and social reform.<sup>10</sup>

Within the academic community, Swedish social scientists were generally supportive of the investigation’s efforts, but found them often wanting in comparison with those of its Norwegian predecessor. While the power investigation skilfully introduced the cutting-edge notion of imprecise, relational and situational power into Swedish social science, some complained that the numerous empirical studies did not directly prove how this supposedly obscure power actually worked in business, politics, organisations and media (Niklasson 1992). The politically loaded question that had articulated the concerns set out in the directives, ‘*Who* has power?’, had been replaced with the much more complex, but also seemingly more harmless question of ‘*Where* is power?’

Critics on the right thought that the power investigation had not probed the democratising role of private entrepreneurship and the promise of what today would be called corporate social responsibility. Jan-Erik Lane (1992), a political scientist at Oslo University, faulted the power investigation for not addressing the supposedly hegemonic position of the labour movement in Swedish politics and society.

Social scientists and politicians to the left and to the centre expressed dissatisfaction with the power investigation for often assuming that the market had a ‘pluralising’ effect upon the provision of public service, without taking into account the negative effects of consumerism and the issues of age, class and sustainability, that is, the interests and rights of coming generations. For example, one critic, Annika Åhnberg of the Left Party, noted that the power investigation had not analysed the way in which the members of the power investigation themselves exercised power in conducting the power investigation as representatives of government-commissioned science (Åhnberg 1992). Some critics on the right agreed, wondering whether it could be considered legitimate for the government to entrust a specific group of social scientists with studying such a crucial, yet elusive, phenomenon as power (Niklasson 1992).

From the perspective of the power investigation, these concerns could be relatively easily refuted. First, democratic politics should ideally generate continuous debates on the ‘essentially contested’ understanding of society. The power investigation did not aim to establish a consensus on the status of democracy and power in Sweden, but to promote precisely such a debate. Second, in the 1980s, Swedish social science was largely funded by the government, and none of the critics of the power investigation, who were often Swedish academics who had not participated in the study itself, suggested that Swedish social science in general was biased in favour of the Government because of its overall dependence upon government funding.

Swedish academics generally considered the Swedish power investigation less successful than its Norwegian precedent in raising awareness of power issues. Ironically, this was repeatedly stated by debaters while the investigation’s findings were discussed in the public sphere. In fact, the debate that ensued mostly took place between academics and public intellectuals, rather than among politicians and citizens.<sup>11</sup>

With regard to the latter, one of the most debated contributions of the power investigation was Hirdman’s (1989) study *Att lägga livet till rätta* (Putting Life Right). Her other contributions to the power investigation had already had an energising effect upon the debate regarding equality, gender and feminism in contemporary Swedish society. This book presented a critical reassessment of the communitarian, yet rationalistic morality of the Swedish welfare state, addressing the dark side of social control inherent in what was formerly the positively coded metaphor of *folkhemmet* (‘the people’s home’). The debate set the scene for contention over issues of power in terms of inclusion and exclusion, identity politics, integration and multiculturalism that followed in the 1990s and 2000s. Furthermore, Hirdman’s work made a strong impression on public debate about the Swedish welfare state, both at home and abroad.

Much of the ensuing discussion concentrated upon the ‘sins of the past’ and did not link the contemporary demand for public control of power due to the economic and political crisis of the early 1990s with the crisis of the 1930s. A critic on the left, sociologist Göran Therborn, argued that the power investigation had failed to take into account the continuity between the supposedly illegitimate social engineering of the 1930s and the seemingly legitimate contemporary demands for public power to take control of social change. It was assumed that there was some kind of rift separating these two positions, something Therborn (1992) found difficult to justify.

### **Welfare State Retrenchment: From the Swedish Model to the Open Society**

When the power investigation delivered its final report in the Summer 1990, it was poised to make a significant contribution to the upcoming election campaign. By then, however, many of the concerns, problems and questions, which had originally motivated the launching of the power investigation in 1985, had changed. Systemic and ideological welfare state criticism had been superseded by largely economic considerations in regard to the economic crisis in Spring 1990, Sweden's relations to the EEC/EU, and the aftermath of the political turbulence of the late 1980s, including the assassination of Prime Minister Palme in February 1986. To some extent, then, the power investigation did fit the familiar saying that one of the primary functions of publicly commissioned studies in Sweden has been to bury hot potatoes, even if this can hardly have been anticipated or desired.

The investigation's original concerns had largely been replaced by a widespread understanding that the crisis of the Swedish model was due to economic causes and required market-oriented solutions. Yet, the technical complexity of administering a more ambitious welfare state, financing it through mutual cooperation between capital and labour, and the legitimacy of the welfare state with its corporatism and the committee system (involving popular movements, interest groups and authorities alongside political parties) remained, creating two interlocked problems: on the one hand, the 'sectoralisation' through iron triangles that had usurped public power and, on the other, the preservation of private power networks that had co-opted public power. The intertwining of these two problems obscured power beyond recognition.

Both of these problems had played a decisive role in three calls for opening up politics and the public sector from above as well as from below that had preceded the launching of the power investigation: there had been public demands for more insight, influence, participation and local democracy in controlling the public sector, for example openness from below. When this demand was channelled through established party politics—both by the bourgeois parties and by the social democrats—it was largely transformed into the question of how politicians could gain or regain public power so that they could influence the authorities in the interest of the citizens (public opinion), for example openness from above. Here, the demand for renewal also linked up with the demand from the left for public scrutiny of private power concentration and its influence upon public power as well as with the demand from the right for a public check on the social democratic influence within the public sector.

When Ingvar Carlsson officially introduced the power investigation in June 1985, he stated that the expert opinions developed would form the basis for parliamentary decisions. However, the directives did not require that the power investigation provide any recommendations for policy implementation. Despite that, the final report did make a suggestion with regard to policy language, arguing that the corporatist Swedish model and its 'hierarchical' structure of social relations had become largely obsolete and a stumbling block to improved democracy. Adopting a more 'vertical' view of society instead would make it possible to replace the supposedly ailing Swedish model with a new image: that of Sweden as an 'open society' (Pettersson 1987b, 1989a, 1989b; SOU 1990:44, 405–9). While the power investigators cautioned against overstating the difference between these two images, noting that the Swedish model had contained many dynamic and internally conflicting elements, the widespread acceptance of the open society as a catchword for the

Swedish political and social system (alongside the welfare state) has proven remarkably resilient and continues to structure public debate even today (Götz and Marklund, [forthcoming](#)).

## Conclusion

The political impetus to the power investigation originated with the Left Party, and in particular Hermansson's long-standing concerns with the problem of increased concentration of private power in affluent welfare states—power that threatened to incapacitate state autonomy. To social democrats, the power investigation was presented as a way to continue the quest for combining democracy with efficiency, liberty and power in the Swedish welfare state, that is, to provide a solution to the steering problem, while simultaneously mapping private power concentrations that might need to be controlled. Through this dual focus, politicians and public administrators would as an added benefit, be able to learn from business how to exercise power in an increasingly volatile world.<sup>12</sup> Among bourgeois politicians, by contrast, the power investigation was seen as an instrument for detecting 'hidden' power structures in the public sector.

On the most basic level, then, the power investigation resulted from a growing concern that power, wherever it could be found, needed to be scrutinised. The 'iceberg of power' thesis that assumed that power had an inherent capacity of hiding itself, and the more hidden, the more dangerous, had entered Swedish political culture. At the same time, it confirmed the belief that the power elites were honest enough to commission their own scrutiny (Götz 2010). By probing different ways of navigating this tension, the power investigation played an important role in fusing bourgeois and social democratic languages of 'governance as scrutiny'. In rhetorically rejuvenating the Swedish style of governance, containing the bureaucracy critique, and providing new vocabularies of participation, public service and openness to replace the language of planning and rationalisation of the past, these manoeuvres bridged the ideological and rhetorical gap between bourgeois and social democratic policy that had widened during the previous 20 years. A promise was held out of pluralism and performance, liberty as well as security and justice, and representation together with responsibility.

From the 1990s and onwards, these vocabularies would become characteristic of 'post-political governance' (Garsten and Jacobsson 2013). They also played their part in establishing a new national narrative about the recent past of the Swedish welfare state and its possible future. In providing this 'thick description', the ideals of the universalistic welfare state continued to be embraced, while its means seemed more obsolete. Now, market-oriented alternatives could be allowed in the quest to achieve the long-standing goal of making welfare state politics more democratic and more efficient (Scharpf 1999). Paradoxically, the national optics of this research effort contradicted some of the tendencies towards individualisation and internationalisation it had itself identified and analysed, supporting the persistence of a weak, yet unifying vision of a 'national we' in view of rising global competition (Kettunen 2008).

The power investigation had no mandate to provide an authoritative view on power. Rather, it was tasked with amassing knowledge and contributed to the debate over Swedish democracy. Nowadays, no serious attempt at analysing or discussing the political and social development of post-industrial Sweden from the 1970s to the 1990s can ignore the

impressive output of the power investigation or the interpretative effort of its main report. Perhaps the most significant, although unintentional, achievement of the power investigation was that it contributing to shaping the image of the past Swedish model (to which contemporary observers may look back with longing or discomfort, even in the 2010s) while embracing the notion of contemporary Sweden as moving towards becoming an open society.

The numerous individual studies commissioned by the power investigation are so nuanced and rich that they cannot be reduced to support either the position of welfare state critics or welfare state supporters. However, the overall output of the investigation has clearly contributed to cement the widespread public belief that a fundamental shift took place during the 1980s—one from the corporatist and allegedly more ‘mechanical’ welfare state of old, to the supposedly more ‘dynamic’ competition state of the present. Through its kaleidoscopic outlook, the power investigation tells us the intriguing story of a welfare state capable of change, despite all the claims of stagnation and inertia which preceded its commissioning, and directs our gaze from the Swedish model of the past to the open society of the future.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> This dissatisfaction seems to have been of a temporary character, however. Already in the early 1980s, public trust in and support of the public sector were again on the rise, as evidenced in sociological reports.
- <sup>2</sup> Interview with Olof Petersson, 24 April 2013.
- <sup>3</sup> [Arbetsrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek](#), SSU:s arkiv, handlingar från SSU:s distriktskonferens i Södertälje den 24 mars 1985, Statsrådsberedningens pressmeddelande den 24 mars 1985 om tillsättandet av en maktutredning och om statsrådet Ingvar Carlssons tillkännagivande samma dag vid SSU:s distriktskonferens i Södertälje.
- <sup>4</sup> [Arbetsrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek](#), SSU:s arkiv, handlingar från SSU:s distriktskonferens i Södertälje den 24 mars 1985, Stolpar till Ingvar Carlssons tal.
- <sup>5</sup> This had indeed been one of the original arguments against a scientific study and in favour of a parliamentary committee.
- <sup>6</sup> [Riksarkivet](#), [Kommittéarkiv](#), [Maktutredningen](#), YK 4108, Volym 1, Statsrådsberedningens pressmeddelande den 28 juni 1985 om maktutredningens uppdrag.
- <sup>7</sup> Interview with Olof Petersson, 24 April 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> Both Hirdman and Petersson expressed some surprise at having been offered the position on the power investigation, in both cases personally by Ingvar Carlsson. Interview with Yvonne Hirdman, 10 May 2012; Interview with Olof Petersson, 24 April 2013.
- <sup>9</sup> [Riksarkivet](#), [Kommittéarkiv](#), [Maktutredningen](#), YK4108, Maktutredningens redovisning den 21 augusti 1986 till justitiedepartementet.
- <sup>10</sup> [Riksarkivet](#), [Kommittéarkiv](#), [Maktutredningen](#), Pressklipp, YK 4108, Vols 25–34.
- <sup>11</sup> [Riksarkivet](#), [Kommittéarkiv](#), [Maktutredningen](#), Pressklipp, YK 4108, Vols 25–34.
- <sup>12</sup> This resembles the way in which social reformers in the 1930s looked at the scientific management of industry in order to develop efficient means towards social engineering.

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