



***Aristocrats and Refined Peasants:
The Concept of Aristocracy in Swedish
Historiography***

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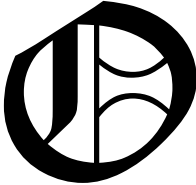
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Abstract: This article investigates the evolution of aristocracy as a concept in Swedish historiography from the early nineteenth century to the present. In the political climate of the early 1800s, aristocracy became an increasingly contested concept, as reflected in ordinary language and the writing of national histories. A scholarly debate over anti-aristocratic prejudice between the historians Anders Fryxell and Erik Gustaf Geijer in the 1840s illustrates contemporary concerns to define the Swedish aristocracy and its relation to the nation. The debate gave rise to a persistent yet adaptable dualistic view of history, enduring well into the twentieth century. Historians portrayed monarchs, aristocrats, nobles, and peasants in a dualistic manner, dividing social groups into two oppositional forces. By emphasising the agency of freeholding peasants, notions of a Swedish *Sonderweg* were reinforced, facilitating the conceptualisation of peasant aristocrats. In tracing this historical trajectory, the article demonstrates how the meaning of aristocracy has evolved in response to scholarly objectives and historiographical trends.

Keywords: aristocracy; anti-aristocratic prejudice; Sweden; historiography; peasant elites

Storm over the Aristocracy

“ur history has been distorted,” declared the famous Swedish historian Anders Fryxell in a letter from 1842. According to Fryxell, democratism and monarchism had shaped the views of Swedish historiographers and caused them to “neglect what splendid and beneficial deeds our nobility has performed in the service of our fatherland.”¹ To revise this distorted picture, Fryxell published in 1845 the booklet *Om aristokrat-fördömandet i svenska historien* (On Anti-Aristocratic Prejudice in Swedish History). The text was a polemical work that refuted the, according to Fryxell, anti-aristocratic claims and historical interpretations made by the

¹ Cited in Carl Arvid Hessler, “‘Aristokratifördömandet’: En riktning i svensk historieskrivning,” *Scandia* 15, no. 2 (1943): 256.

most influential historian of the day, Erik Gustaf Geijer. A heated debate ensued between Fryxell, Geijer, and the latter's disciples, spanning over several years and publications. Contemporaries referred to this dispute as a war, or, more biasedly, as Fryxell's crusade against Geijer.²

When Fryxell wished to restore the reputation of the Swedish aristocracy, the term had several meanings. Primarily, aristocracy signified the highest stratum of the nobility, but Fryxell also used the term interchangeably with nobility or to denote a specific form of state.³ In this article, I consciously refrain from defining aristocracy or what distinguishes the aristocracy from the nobility. Instead, my aim is to shed light on how the concept of aristocracy has been used in Swedish historiography.⁴ Hence, I ask what historiographers were doing in saying what they said about aristocracy.⁵ The debate between Fryxell and Geijer is a suitable starting point for such a discussion because it reflects two enduring historiographic tendencies. Firstly, defining aristocracy was part of a wider project of defining the Swedish people. Nineteenth-century historians in general were concerned with writing the nation through national histories.⁶ Fryxell and Geijer were no exceptions. Both stressed Swedish exceptionalism by emphasising the peculiar social structure of freeholding peasants in Swedish history. This idea of a Swedish *Sonderweg*, based on a politically forceful peasantry that functioned as a counterweight to the nobility, has remained prominent in Swedish historiography well into the twenty-first century. Secondly, since at least the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of aristocracy has been

² Letter from Bror Emil Hildebrand to Hans Järta, 24/25 February 1846, in *Hans Järta och Bror Emil Hildebrand: Brevväxling åren 1834-1847*, ed. Kerstin Assarsson-Rizzi (Stockholm: Kungl. Samfundet för utgivande av handskrifter rörande Skandinaviens historia, 2017), 642; Per Erik Bergfalk, "Öfversigt af den nyaste litteraturen," *Frey: Tidskrift för vetenskap och konst* (1846), 240.

³ Anders Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet i svenska historien jemnte granskning av tvenne blad i prof. Geijers trenne föreläsningar* (Stockholm: Wahlström, 1845), 3-16.

⁴ Hence, the article does not deal with the aristocracy or nobility in Sweden and Finland (which formed part of the Swedish realm until 1809) per se. For such overviews, see, for example, Anthony F. Upton, "The Swedish Nobility, 1600-1772," in *The European Nobilities in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, vol. 2: *Northern, Central and Eastern Europe*, ed. Hamish Scott (London: Longman, 1995), 11-40; Jan von Konow, *Sveriges adels historia* (Karlskrona: Abrahamsons tryckeri, 2005); Bo Eriksson, *Svenska adelns historia* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 2011); Janne Haikari, Marko Hakanen, Anu Lahtinen, and Alex Snellman, ed., *Adelns historia i Finland*, trans. Mattias Huss (Stockholm: Lind & Co, 2023).

⁵ See Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1: *Regarding Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 85.

⁶ See Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz, ed., *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Stefan Berger and Christoph Conrad, *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

closely associated with historical interpretations that reproduce a dualistic understanding of history or a dichotomisation of society.⁷ Because the nature of this dichotomy and scholars' view of the oppositional social forces have varied over time, the meanings and uses of aristocracy have also varied.

This article, then, traces the shifting meanings and uses of the concept of aristocracy in Swedish historiography. Scholars have written quite extensively about the debate between Fryxell and Geijer, demonstrating its social, political, and historiographic context as well as how it influenced later generations of historians by underpinning a dualistic view of history.⁸ However, one context appears to me in need of greater consideration. Prior to the nineteenth century, aristocracy was associated with its Aristotelian meaning and denoted a form of government: rule by the few, a minority, or the best. During the French Revolution, meaning was turned on its head. No longer did aristocracy refer merely to a political system or constitutional arrangement, but rather to a specific social group. It began to "imply a description of social relations, of certain people and their activities."⁹ Aristocracy thus became a flexible concept that historians could use in different ways when analysing the past and presenting their interpretations of history.

I begin by showing that aristocracy in the early nineteenth century became a more nuanced concept in ordinary language, which forms an important but neglected context for understanding the historiographical debate between Fryxell and Geijer. The analysis of the debate, to which I then turn, demonstrates the different ways in which the historians defined the aristocracy and its significance in Swedish history. In the third part, I focus on

⁷ Ulf Sjödel, "Kungamakt och aristokrati i svensk 1900-talsdebatt: En studie i dualistisk historiesyn," *Historisk tidskrift* 85, no. 1 (1965): 1–79.

⁸ Bertil Boëthius, "Striden mellan Geijer och Fryxell om aristokratfördomandet i Sveriges historia," *Svensk tidskrift* 13, no. 5 (1923): 332–343; Hessler, "Aristokratfördomandet," 209–266; Alf Kjellén, "Fryxell och samhällsklasserna," *Samlaren* 24 (1943): 1–20; Gustaf Jacobson, *Från Geijer till Hjärne: Studier i svensk historieskrivning under 1800-talet* (Stockholm: Fahlcrantz & Gummælius, 1945), 157–174; Rolf Torstendahl, *Källkritik och vetenskapssyn i svensk historisk forskning 1820–1920* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1964), 87–92; Rolf Karlblom, "Ehrenheim och Fryxell: Till frågan om frihetstidens rehabilitering under 1800-talet," *Scandia* 31, no. 2 (1965): 173–188; Sjödel, "Kungamakt och aristokrati," 1–79; Bo Stråth, "Erik Gustaf Geijer: Mångfacetterad historiker, poet och samhällsdebattör," in *Svenska historiker: Från medeltid till våra dagar*, ed. Ragnar Björk and Alf W. Johansson (Stockholm: Norstedt, 2009), 180–181; Rolf Torstendahl, "Anders Fryxell: En outsider i historikerskrået," in *Svenska historiker: Från medeltid till våra dagar*, ed. Ragnar Björk and Alf W. Johansson (Stockholm: Norstedt, 2009), 197–198; Gunnar Artéus, "Geijer och de stora 1800-talsverken," in *Historieskrivningen i Sverige*, ed. Gunnar Artéus and Klas Åmark (Lund: Studentlitteratur, 2012), 41–58.

⁹ Jonathan Powis, *Aristocracy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 6–7; Nadir Weber, "Die Republik des Adels: Zum Begriff der Aristokratie in der politischen Sprache der Frühen Neuzeit," *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung* 38, no. 2 (2011): 217–258. See also Nadir Weber's contribution to this special issue.

the dualistic tendency in historiography that emanated from the nineteenth-century debate, and how social historians in the twentieth century sought to liberate themselves from a dualistic view by redefining the aristocracy. I then discuss how the dualistic view transformed when scholars in the later twentieth century became interested in issues of state formation. I conclude by discussing how the notion of a Swedish *Sonderweg*, with peasants as a remarkably forceful social and political group, enabled historians to conceptualise an aristocracy of peasants. The article thus shows the flexibility of aristocracy as a concept, and how it has been used differently depending on scholarly objectives and interests.

Meanings of Aristocracy in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

In the search for meanings and definitions, dictionaries are a good place to start. The first completed monolingual dictionary in Swedish appeared in 1850-1855.¹⁰ However, an uncompleted dictionary from 1842 contained entries for *aristokrat* and *aristokrati*. The aristocrat was defined in two ways. First as someone who by birth was "a member of the higher or richer nobility" and second as someone characterised by specific "ways of thinking," that is, a person "who promotes, loves, defends and advocates the necessity of an estate separated from others in society through birth."¹¹ Aristocracy also had two definitions. First, a form of government in contrast to democracy because "power belongs to some distinguished families, who by birth receives a place in the government." Second, aristocracy denoted an estate: "Nobility in general, but the highest, most distinguished, rich, and powerful in particular."¹²

The dictionary published in 1850 provided more elaborate as well as historic definitions. Aristocracy "originally" signified "rule of the best and most distinguished" and "formerly" a specific form of government "in which the right to govern the state only belonged to those citizens distinguished by genius, birth, riches or talents." The list was more diverse when it came to "current" meanings of aristocracy: a form of government in which "the nobility or most powerful of the noble families, or the wealthiest or most powerful lead the business of the state;" or "the nobility in general, but in particular the

¹⁰ Anna Helga Hannesdóttir, *Lexikografihistorisk spegel: Den enspråkiga svenska lexikografins utveckling ur den tvåspråkiga* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 1998), 238–242, 462–464.

¹¹ "Aristokrat," in *Ordbok öfver svenska språket i dess närvarande skick*, Volume 1, ed. Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (Örebro: N. M. Lindhs boktryckeri, 1842), 154.

¹² "Aristokrati," in *Ordbok öfver svenska språket i dess närvarande skick*, Volume 1, ed. Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (Örebro: N. M. Lindhs boktryckeri, 1842), 154.

highest, richest, and most powerful;" or "the most esteemed, rich and powerful in a society, regardless of their belonging to the nobility." Aristocracy could also be used in a figurative sense, referring to superiority and precedence.¹³ An aristocrat, then, was originally "one of the finest and most distinguished in a society." But now it also signified "a member of the most powerful class of people in a state, whether noble or not." An additional definition was that of an "advocate of aristocratic tenets, opinions, and customs." What this implied more precisely remained unsaid. The aristocrat also had a figurative sense: "A person who looks upon his estate or occupation with predilection and pride, and considers himself as good as anyone, and better than most."¹⁴

The dictionaries reflect both expansion and specification regarding the meaning of aristocracy. This tendency is also detectable in ordinary language, with newspapers serving as an illuminating source.¹⁵ Through the *National Library of Sweden*, all published Swedish newspapers between 1645 and 1906 are available online and searchable.¹⁶ A search in the database for the term *aristokrat** reveals its first appearance in 1753 when an author described how the Saxon government transformed from democracy to aristocracy.¹⁷ Notably, writers commonly used the terms aristocracy and aristocrats when discussing or reporting on non-Swedish contexts like Switzerland, the Netherlands, Spain, England, or France.¹⁸ Tellingly, Abraham Sahlstedt, who published both a glossary of foreign words commonly used in the Swedish language and a Swedish vocabulary, included *aristocratie*—defined as the rule of lords or by the great in a land—in the former but not the latter.¹⁹

¹³ "Aristokrati," in *Ordbok öfver svenska språket*, Volume 1, ed. Anders Fredrik Dalin (Stockholm: Joh. Beckman, 1850), 88.

¹⁴ "Aristokrat," in *Ordbok öfver svenska språket*, Volume 1, ed. Anders Fredrik Dalin (Stockholm: Joh. Beckman, 1850), 88.

¹⁵ See Patrik Lundell, "From Enlightened Participation to Liberal Professionalism: On the Historiography of the Press as a Resource for Legitimacy," in *History of Participatory Media: Politics and Publics, 1750-2000*, ed. Anders Ekström, Solveig Jülich, Frans Lundgren, and Per Wieselgren (London: Routledge, 2010), 10–19.

¹⁶ Kungliga Biblioteket, *Svenska dagstidningar*: <https://tidningar.kb.se/>

¹⁷ *Stockholms Weckoblad*, 1753-09-29.

¹⁸ See, for example, *Dagligt Allehanda*, 1771-01-25; *Tidningar Utgifne Af Et Sällskap I Åbo*, 1783-12-18; *Posttidningar*, 1786-08-07; *Nyköpings Weckoblad*, 1792-08-18; *Extra Posten*, 1793-04-02; *Posttidningar*, 1793-04-04; *Uppsala Tidning*, 1796-05-28; *Linköpingsbladet*, 1799-10-12; *Karlskrona Weckoblad*, 1803-22-01; *Stockholmsposten* 1823-06-25; *Argus den IV*, 1823-10-29. See also Nadir Weber's contribution to this special issue and the discussion of the relation between aristocracy and republics.

¹⁹ "Aristocratie," in *Dictionarium psevdosuecanum, det är: ord-lista på främmande i svenska språket förekommande ord*, ed. Abraham Sahlstedt (Westerås: Joh. Laur. Horrn, 1769), 9; *Swensk ordbok med latinsk uttolkning*, ed. Abraham Sahlstedt (Stockholm: Carl Stolpe, 1773).

Although aristocracy was linked to foreignness, the term was also applied to Swedish contexts in a pejorative sense associated with oppression and corruption. In political debates during the "Age of Liberty" (1719-1772), when Sweden was a republican monarchy and the balance of power between king, council, and estates was weighted in the latter's favour, aristocracy became synonymous with oligarchy. The reintroduction of absolutism in 1772 was framed as a means to safeguard the king and kingdom from aristocratic rule. As a form of government, aristocracy was seen as a negative contrast to democracy. Aristocrat, in this context and through French influence, became a political slogan and term of abuse.²⁰ In 1775, a writer declared in *Dagligt Allehanda* that "ever since I learned to think as befits an honourable Swedish man, I have been as little inclined to aristocratism as to slavery, and I cannot bend my knee to the former, as I wish to avoid the latter."²¹ Four years later, the same newspaper articulated the idea that "aristocratic rule is an abscess."²² In 1805, a writer linked the growth of "aristocratic power" to a weakening of royal power and a "reduced respect for the peasants."²³

From about the 1820s, a more varied usage and new compounds made their way into the newspapers, though the tone was still predominantly negative. In 1827, for example, an author distinguished a "noble aristocracy" from a "merchant aristocracy." The latter was characterised as "egoistic" and needed "to be suffocated for the sake of the common good."²⁴ Others spoke of a "burgher aristocracy," a "land owning aristocracy," an "aristocracy of Burgermeisters and councillors," a "feudal aristocracy," or an "aristocracy of talent, genius, and fashion."²⁵ There was clearly an issue of naming and definition. As one author stated, "throughout history [...] one finds hereditary nobility under various names and in different shapes [...] of no use to the State but only to the nobility itself [...]. But if nobility in a monarchical state should be beneficial, it requires both honour and

²⁰ *Dagligt Allehanda*, 1772-08-22; *Hwad Nytt?* 1772-09-16; "Aristokrati," in *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok*, Volume 2 (1901), available online, accessed 2023-06-21: <https://www.saob.se/artikel/?seek=aristokrati&pz=1>; "Aristokrat," in *Svenska Akademiens Ordbok*, Volume 2 (1901), available online, accessed 2023-06-21: https://www.saob.se/artikel/?unik=A_2157-0084.789x; Hessler, "Aristokratfördömandet," 209-212; Charlotta Wolff, "Aristocratic Notions of Liberty and Patriotism in the Age of Liberty," in *Scandinavia in the Age of Revolution: Nordic Political Cultures, 1740-1820*, ed. Pasi Ihalainen, Michael Bregnsbo, Karin Sennefelt, and Patrik Winton (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 127-128.

²¹ *Dagligt Allehanda*, 1775-03-20.

²² *Dagligt Allehanda*, 1779-01-26.

²³ *Norrköpings tidningar*, 1805-11-20.

²⁴ *Helsingborgsposten*, 1827-06-26.

²⁵ *Christianstads Weckoblad*, 1827-07-14; *Argus den IV*, 1827-09-17; *Medborgaren*, 1829-10-03; *Stockholmsposten*, 1827-12-11; *Argus*, 1830-06-30; *Stockholmsposten*, 1830-08-23.

riches.”²⁶ In 1828, *Argus den IV* published the translation of an essay that had appeared in *Le Constitutionnel*. However, the editor denounced the “delusions” expressed in it, such as the declaration that: “In all states, whether monarchies or republics, but above all in the latter, an aristocracy is necessary [...] It is the aristocracy that gives the state strength, esteem, and significance.”²⁷ In 1831, one could read the following: “Democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy can all be good in and of themselves, but turn nasty because the people in charge often are. With a simple, moderate, and sober people, all three forms of government are good.”²⁸

The condemnation of aristocracy continued to flourish in the Swedish newspapers. However, as the examples above indicate, it became common to distinguish between different types of aristocrats—the good and the bad. By the 1830s, people engaged in public debate with a more nuanced concept, and dictionaries reflected this expansion and specification of the aristocratic concept. With specification came new meanings, and writers became increasingly compelled to define and characterise those aristocrats they condemned. Prior to the professionalisation of historiography in the later nineteenth century, these general shifts of meaning arguably exerted great influence on the writing of history. And it was in this context that Anders Fryxell accused Erik Gustaf Geijer of anti-aristocratic prejudice in 1845.

Defending the Aristocracy from Anti-Aristocratic Prejudice

In 1831, a writer in *Aftonbladet* reviewed the latest book in Anders Fryxell’s multi-volume series *Berättelser ur svenska historien* (Tales from Swedish History), which focused on the reigns of Johan III (1569-1592), Sigismund (1592-1599), and Duke Karl (who subsequently ascended the throne as Karl IX). Fryxell’s wish to restore the reputation of the aristocracy was already clear. The reviewer particularly appreciated Fryxell’s revisionist interpretation of Duke Karl, portraying him as violent and vindictive rather than a hero who threw off “the yoke of aristocracy” and defended the realm from Catholicism and foreign rulers. Fryxell emphasised the esteem of the aristocrats in the council of the realm, whom Karl persecuted. Whereas Karl was driven by envy and bloodthirstiness, their “aristocratic spirit” was not so much reprehensible as characteristic of the period.²⁹

²⁶ Cited in *Den svenska pressens historia, Volume 1: I begynnelsen (tiden före 1830)*, ed. Claes-Göran Holmberg, Ingemar Oscarsson, and Jarl Torbacke (Stockholm: Ekerlids förlag, 2000), 256.

²⁷ *Argus den IV*, 1828-07-26.

²⁸ *Westmanlands Läns Tidning*, 1831-03-03, reprint of an article in *Fäderneslandet*.

²⁹ *Aftonbladet*, 1831-02-10; *Aftonbladet*, 1831-02-11; *Aftonbladet*, 1831-02-15.

When Fryxell in 1845 published *Om aristokrat-fördömandet* to dismiss Erik Gustaf Geijer's historical interpretations, the case of Duke Karl (or Karl IX, r.1604-1611) illustrated his point. The argument was that Swedish aristocrats and nobles had been treated with partiality and prejudice by historiographers who neglected their many and great deeds. Historians accused aristocrats of crimes they had never committed and blamed them for wrongs that monarchs should be held responsible for. Fryxell stressed that Karl's accession to the throne was an unlawful rebellion against the rightful king, Sigismund. By contrast, the aristocratic councillors who opposed Duke Karl upheld the law by remaining loyal to their oath-sworn king. To Fryxell, the aristocrats were honourable whereas Karl and his secretaries acted as demagogues when they roused the peasants against the aristocrats. Councillors who were forced into exile or unjustly executed by Karl in 1600 had laudably sacrificed themselves rather than submit to the duke's threats or promises of reward. However, in a history written by the winners, the events had been presented as Karl's defence of Lutheranism and the state. And ever since, Fryxell argued, historians had sought to justify Karl's unlawful actions by unfoundedly presenting the aristocrats as conspirators.³⁰

Fryxell's text was a detailed criticism, directed at three published lectures given by Erik Gustaf Geijer in 1844. Fryxell argued that Geijer placed himself at the head of anti-aristocratic prejudice and took the condemnation of the aristocracy further than any other historiographer.³¹ To Fryxell, truth and righteousness were the highest values of historiography, and he saw those values corrupted by Geijer's ultra-royalism, ultra-patriotism, ultra-heroism, and ethical relativism.³² The historians' detailed empirical argumentation need not concern us here. Instead, it is their different views on the aristocracy that is of interest.

Fryxell's use of the term aristocracy encompassed all the definitions provided in the dictionary from 1850. He employed it to denote to a specific form of state, to the highest stratum of the nobility, to the nobility in general, or to the wealthiest and most well-educated with grand positions in society. Predominantly, his understanding was influenced by the social division of people into four estates. Aristocrats and nobles belonged to the

³⁰ Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 3–20.

³¹ Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 24. However, a fiercer and even more radical condemnation of the aristocracy appeared in Anonymous, *Betydelsen af Sveriges adel uti dess historia: En betraktelse för dagen* (Stockholm: Lindberg & komp., 1844) [first published in Freja 1841].

³² Anders Fryxell, *Min historias historia: Autobiografisk uppsats*, ed. Eva A. Fryxell (Stockholm: J. Seligman & C:is förlag, 1884), 59–69.

same estate and were discussed as such, distinct from the estates of clergymen, burghers, and peasants.³³ By writing about aristocracy and nobility interchangeably, Fryxell's text served as a defence of both, which reflected the political situation in mid-nineteenth-century Sweden. In the 1840s, the societal question of political representation was intensely debated. Fryxell welcomed reforms but argued that the best form of government incorporated elements of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy. He criticised those he deemed rabble-rousing liberals, including Geijer, who advocated for extended political rights without sufficient stress on moral obligations.³⁴ In the 1860s, the *Riksdag* was restructured from a Diet of four estates—where nobles, clergymen, burghers, and peasants were politically represented—to a bicameral parliament where income and property determined eligibility and the right to vote. In this context of social and political change, and the dismantling of the society of estates, nobles and aristocrats asserted their place. They developed strategies for adaptation—as seen in patterns of marriage, education, and occupation—while retaining a sense of social identity and uniqueness anchored in notions of the past.³⁵ To defend the aristocracy of the past was simultaneously a response to contemporary politics.

In his lectures, Geijer also employed the term aristocracy in various ways though he primarily spoke about the nobility. When he asked himself if a nobility existed in ancient Sweden, he found that there were two ways of looking at the matter. On the one hand, because early law codes did not confer specific rights to a distinct noble class, the nobility was originally formed by *bönder* (peasants) or *odalbönder* (yeomen) who owned their land and had a political voice at the *ting* (local assemblies). On the other hand, a nobility of kings existed, and when numerous kings fought each other, a society of nobles and aristocrats emerged. Warriors mounted horses to distinguish themselves from the crowd, later amassing riches and powers, and elevating themselves above the law. In the thirteenth century, the *världsliga frälset* (noble estate) was established through the king's granting of privileges in exchange for knight service. This created a division between the *allmoge* (the commonality or peasantry) who bore taxes and the tax-exempted *frälse* (nobility). Within the noble estate, each man became a defender of his honour through force of arms. The

³³ Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 3–20.

³⁴ Kjellén, "Fryxell och samhällsklasserna," 2, 6, 10, 12–13, 17–20.

³⁵ Göran Norrby, *Adel i förvandling: Adliga strategier och identiteter i 1800-talets borgerliga samhälle* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2005); Eriksson, *Svenska adelns historia*, 400–402; Magnus Bergman, *Att höra det förflutna till: Adlig minneskultur och kollektiv identitet efter ståndssamhällets upplösning, 1869-1976* (Malmö: Malmö University, 2021). For comparison, see also Marion Dotter's contribution to this special issue.

allmoge, in contrast, lost its honour and was, as opposed to the nobles, subjected to corporal punishments. Soon, diverging interests among the privileged caused internal discord. The previous state of war between tribes and royal houses transformed into fierce struggles between "the Greats," that is, aristocrats in the council.³⁶ Thus Geijer presented the history of the Swedish nobility and aristocracy.

What concerned Geijer was not so much the aristocracy as the Swedish people, the *folk*. Generally, though not without exceptions, the nobility and aristocracy were seen as an internal Other and not fully incorporated into the notion of the Swedish people. Instead, the *folk* became synonymous with freeholding farmers, peasants, and yeomen whom Geijer discussed in terms of the free *bonde*, *odalbonde*, and *allmoge*. He forged a monarchic-democratic origin story by emphasising that true freedom and unity was achieved through a close alliance between monarchs and the Swedish people, consisting of freeholding peasants or yeomen with an ancient right of political representation.³⁷ The Swedish state was founded on that inseparable union between royal and popular power. In the Middle Ages, the nobility had pursued an aristocratic confederation through the establishment of a Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian union under a foreign king. But the Swedish nation was born when the people rebelled in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and the Swedish king emerged as the "man of the Swedish people." Geijer stressed that particularistic interests of estates and aristocrats promoted discord whereas the unity of the state was underpinned by an alliance between kings and the people. The nobility and aristocracy were not without merit, but their beneficial contribution only materialised when they united with the Swedish king, as they had done in the reign of Gustav II Adolf (1611-1632). This was a time when the "Great men" truly deserved to be called great. All changed in the reign of Queen Kristina (r.1632-1654), when concord was disturbed by a "grasping aristocracy who threatened to engross the rights of both the throne and the people." According to Geijer, the aristocrats wished to encroach and abolish the ancient political rights of the yeomen and thus eradicate the peasantry as a free estate.³⁸

³⁶ Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Om vår tids inre samhällsförhållanden i synnerhet med afseende på fäderneslandet: Tre föreläsningar ur den hösten 1844 i Uppsala föredragna historiska kurs* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1845), 13, 59, 88–92.

³⁷ Patrik Hall, *Den svenskaste historien: Nationalism i Sverige under sex sekler* (Stockholm: Carlsson Bokförlag, 2000), 108–115, 118–128; Peter Aronsson, Narve Fulsås, Pertti Haapala, and Bernard Eric Jensen, "Nordic National Histories," in *The Contested Nation: Ethnicity, Class, Religion and Gender in National Histories*, ed. Stefan Berger and Chris Lorenz (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 263–264.

³⁸ Geijer, *Om vår tids inre samhällsförhållanden*, 6, 16–17, 50, 60–64, 88.

Fryxell, too, embraced the notion of Swedish exceptionalism by emphasising the role of freeholding peasants. Because feudalism had never been deeply rooted in Swedish society, Fryxell wrote, "among all the people of Europe, no *allmoge* has been as free as the Swedish, and no *allmoge* has suffered so little oppression under its nobility." The Swedish *allmoge* had always been free and "never slaves under the yoke of servitude." Sweden was unique because the *allmoge* as an estate of the realm had enjoyed a legal say in the businesses of state. The Swedish nobility had never been as oppressive as its Russian, Polish, German, and Danish counterparts. Nevertheless, Fryxell questioned Geijer's monarchic-democratic myth by stressing that the periods of royal absolutism in 1660-1697 and 1772-1792 signified slavery, a silencing of the people that the nobles had opposed.³⁹

Fryxell attempted to include the aristocracy and nobility in the concept of the Swedish people, which became clear in his reappraisal of the aristocratic regime during Queen Kristina's minority (1632-1644). Geijer described the regency as an encroaching aristocratic faction that caused financial devastation to the realm and sought to eliminate the freedom of the peasants by putting the land of farmers under noble authority. By contrast, Fryxell argued that the financial troubles were caused by royal wastefulness and the costly wars pursued by monarchs. According to Fryxell, Geijer accused the aristocrats of crimes they had not committed.⁴⁰ In fact, there was "nothing more glorious to the Swedish nation" than the regency government:

It was not a great king, who with his powerful spirit, led the people; it was the people who led themselves and accomplished great and remarkable feats. This was the time when the Swedish nation bloomed, and the flowers that splendidly blossomed were the aristocrats in the council. Why should someone enviously persist in cutting off the flower from its stalk, to separate them from each other, and set one off against the other, when in their time, they together formed a whole.⁴¹

To envision an antithesis between "the great men" and the "people" was a fallacy in Fryxell's opinion. His concept of the people thus comprised all social classes, not only peasants. Fryxell could not understand why Geijer considered a king to be the man of the people if he was only the king of peasants and burghers. Surely, a king of the people must

³⁹ Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 13, 22.

⁴⁰ Geijer, *Om vår tids inre samhällsförhållanden*, 63-65; Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 20-21, 39-45, 52.

⁴¹ Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 14.

be the king of the entire people, including clergymen and nobles.⁴² In response to the criticism, Geijer refuted Fryxell's many objections and misconceptions, which he interpreted as an attack on his own person. Geijer stated that he had not neglected the benefits of the aristocracy. He acknowledged that a greater unity was initially achieved when aristocratic and royal interests coincided. However, he maintained that this unity collapsed when privileged classes pursued self-interest at the expense of a common interest.⁴³ Repeatedly in his response, Geijer thus reproduced the notion of the aristocracy as a distinct category, separated from his concept of the people.

The debate continued in booklets, newspapers, and journals through responses from Fryxell and counterarguments from Geijer's disciples and sympathisers. In the nineteenth century, some embraced Fryxell's views as a contribution to current political debates, and the noble estate awarded him a medal for his efforts.⁴⁴ Yet, Fryxell's arguments were generally rejected as a scholarly contribution. Historians rallied behind Geijer and supported his interpretation of history.⁴⁵ However, in the first half of the twentieth century, the situation changed as historians developed Fryxell's ideas and reevaluated the significant role played by the aristocracy in the historical trajectory of Sweden.

The Dualistic View of History

A century after Fryxell and Geijer debated the significance of the aristocracy, the issue was revisited by the historians Bertil Boëthius and Erik Lönnroth. Boëthius acknowledged Fryxell's call for a more "objective consideration" of the aristocracy, and he referenced the work of Fredrik Lagerroth, who argued in 1915 that Sweden's modern parliamentary system had its roots in aristocratic constitutionalism.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, Boëthius endorsed Geijer's interpretation, asserting that the centralised monarchical state power that

⁴² Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet*, 26, 32, 37, 46–47.

⁴³ Erik Gustaf Geijer, *Svar till professor Fryxell* (Stockholm: L. J. Hjerta, 1846), 15, 27, 31–32, 42, 50, 53, 62, 72, 86, 88.

⁴⁴ Bergman, *Att höra det förflutna till*, 112.

⁴⁵ Anders Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet i svenska historien: Andra häftet* (Uppsala: Wahlström & C., 1846); Anders Fryxell, *Om aristokrat-fördömandet i svenska historien: Tredje häftet* (Stockholm: Simon Magnus förlag, 1846); Carl Gustaf Styffe, "Om aristokrat-fördömandet i svenska historien: Under folkungaätten och unionstiden," *Tidskrift för litteratur* (1851), 129–164; Hessler, "Aristokratfördömandet," 264–265; Sjödell, "Kungamakt och aristokrati," 12–13.

⁴⁶ See Fredrik Lagerroth, *Frihetstidens författning: En studie i den svenska konstitutionalismens historia* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1915), 95–96.

influenced the nineteenth-century Swedish state resulted from collaboration between monarchs and broader segments of the population. According to Boëthius, scholars like Lagerroth and Lönnroth, who built upon Fryxell's ideas to rehabilitate the aristocracy, exaggerated their claims.⁴⁷ In contrast, Erik Lönnroth argued that the sources did not support the idea that "lower classes" rallied behind their regents in a "social freedom struggle." On the contrary, the strong state emerged from the aristocratic councils, not from popular strives towards freedom.⁴⁸

The scholarly debates in 1845 and 1950 reflect a dualistic understanding of history, presenting the political development in Sweden between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries as marked by direct opposition and continuous struggle between monarchy and aristocracy. Geijer and his followers emphasised the cooperation between the monarch and the wider people in the forging of a strong state, whereas Fryxell and his followers stressed that the aristocracy upheld a constitutional programme (which later evolved into popular representation) that checked the absolutist tendencies of monarchs. The "power of the people" was thus attributed to different groups and social constellations. In 1915, Fredrik Lagerroth reinterpreted the cooperation between commoner estates and kings (described by Geijer as monarchic-democratic) as being autocratic-patriarchal and in opposition to the parliamentary-democratic element of aristocratic constitutionalism. In various shapes the dualistic views of history appeared in the works of renowned historians (like Erland Hjärke, Nils Ahnlund, Bertil Boëthius, Erik Lönnroth, and Sven A. Nilsson).⁴⁹ In 1965, Ulf Sjödel analysed this dualistic tendency and argued that the 1950s marked a turning point. No longer were aristocrats/aristocracy and monarchs/monarchy with their associated ideals seen as inherently in conflict, as representing either *regimen politicum* or *regimen regale*, constitutional or patrimonial views. Instead, scholars in the early 1960s (like Nils Runeby, Åke Hermansson, and Kerstin Strömberg-Back) presented a more complicated picture of intermingling ideas and interests. According to Sjödel, this was mainly the result of a less politicised historiography and a shift of interest from constitutional to social issues.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Bertil Boëthius, "Behöver vår historievetenskap lägga om sin kurs?" *Historisk tidskrift* (1950): 232–236.

⁴⁸ Erik Lönnroth, "Är Sveriges historia oföränderlig?" *Historisk tidskrift* (1950): 387.

⁴⁹ Sjödel, "Kungamakt och aristokrati," 26, 29–30, 38–57; Michael Roberts, "On Aristocratic Constitutionalism in Swedish History," in *Essays in Swedish History*, ed. Michael Roberts (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 14–15, 41–44.

⁵⁰ Sjödel, "Kungamakt och aristokrati," 66–74.

The dualistic understanding of monarchs and aristocrats in direct opposition was certainly challenged by scholars emphasising synergies, mutual interests, and cooperation.⁵¹ Arguably, a contributing factor was the call for further qualifications if aristocracy and nobility should function as useful concepts of historical analysis. In 1976, Kurt Ågren criticised the general, less systematic, and common-sense understanding of aristocracy prevalent among historians. Ågren wished to provide clearer concepts of analysis and in the spirit of social history, he approached the subject by developing a model with sets of criteria. Ågren defined a person or family as aristocratic based on social status (measured by birth, matrimonial ties, titles, office holding), political influence (assessed by political office holding), and economic position (using the criteria of property and office holding). However, rather than to speak of an aristocracy, Ågren preferred the term political and social elite.⁵² Björn Asker embraced Ågren's method and asserted the fallacy in assuming an inherent clash between a homogeneous nobility and the Crown. In contrast to Ågren, however, Asker found it appropriate to use the term aristocracy in those instances when social and political elite converged. Asker's issue was not with the term aristocracy, but rather with the less systematic terms *högadel* and *lågadel* (high and low nobility).⁵³ To Ågren and Asker, defining aristocracy in a systematic way was a means of doing away with flattening concepts that did not aid historical analysis or the understanding of a heterogenous elite.⁵⁴

As cultural history gained prominence, the acknowledgement of heterogeneity and a sensitivity to nuances remained central. Simultaneously, a shift of focus occurred. In the social histories produced between the 1940s and early 1980s, social, demographic, economic, and political issues were the main concerns.⁵⁵ In contrast, cultural historians

⁵¹ Jeroen Duindam, *Myths of Power: Norbert Elias and the Early Modern Court* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994), 49–56; Hamish Scott, "Dynastic Monarchy and the Consolidation of Aristocracy during Europe's Long Seventeenth Century," in *Monarchy Transformed: Princes and their Elites in Early Modern Western Europe*, ed. Robert von Friedeburg and John Morrill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 44–86.

⁵² Kurt Ågren, "Rise and Decline of An Aristocracy: The Swedish Social and Political Elite in the 17th Century," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 1, no. 1–4 (1976): 75.

⁵³ Björn Asker, "Aristocracy and Autocracy in Seventeenth-Century Sweden: The Decline of the Aristocracy within the Civil Administration before 1680," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 15, no. 1–2 (1990): 90, 92. See also Sofia Lenninger, "En aristokrat och hans nätverk," in *Renässansens eliter: Maktmänniskor i Italien och Norden*, ed. Gunnar Dahl and Eva Österberg (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2000), 90–96.

⁵⁴ See also Nicola Clark's contribution to this special issue, and how the notion of "hard" and "soft" aristocracy leads to more nuanced analyses.

⁵⁵ For example: Johan Axel Almqvist, *Frälsegodsen i Sverige*. 9 vols. (Stockholm: Liber Förlag, 1931–1976); Sven A. Nilsson, *Krona och frälse i Sverige 1523–1594: Rustjänst, länsväsende, godspolitik* (Lund: Gleerup, 1948); Sven A.

exhibited a greater interest in issues of self-perception, representation, and discourse. For example, Peter Englund argued that to assess if the Swedish elite became more bourgeois in the seventeenth century required an analysis of not only the social background of elites but also their mentality. Englund therefore focused on ideology to determine if the "new men" of the nobility in the late seventeenth century differed from the aristocratic councillors of the first half of the century.⁵⁶ Overall interest thus extended to both the aristocracy and the nobility. Since the 1990s, a growing body of literature has emerged, exploring patron-client relationships, conceptions of honour, ideology, self-fashioning, rhetoric, education, everyday practices, family life, and gender among people scholars variably refer to as aristocrats, nobles, and elites.⁵⁷ The historiographic development in Sweden is comparable to that in England and arguably reflects cross-fertilisation and

Nilsson, *Kampen om de adliga privilegierna 1526-1594* (Lund: Gleerup, 1952); Kerstin Strömberg-Back, *Lagen, rätten, läran: Politisk och kyrklig idédebatt i Sverige under Johan III:s tid* (Lund: Gleerup, 1963); Eric Anthoni, *Finlands medeltida frälse och 1500-talsadel* (Helsinki: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1970); Kurt Ågren, "Breadwinners and Dependents: An Economic Crisis in the Swedish Aristocracy during the 1600s?" in *Aristocrats, Farmers, Proletarians: Essays in Swedish Demographic History*, ed. Kurt Ågren (Stockholm: Esselte, 1973), 9–27; Ingvar Elmroth, *För kung och fosterland: Studier i den svenska adelns demografi och offentliga funktioner 1600-1900* (Lund: Gleerup, 1981).

⁵⁶ Peter Englund, *Det hotade huset: Adliga föreställningar om samhället under stormaktstiden* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1989), 15–19.

⁵⁷ The literature is vast, but see, for example: Angela Rundquist, *Blått blod och liljevita händer: En etnologisk studie av aristokratiska kvinnor 1850-1900* (Stockholm: Carlsson, 1989); Jan Samuelson, "En god och förnuftig matmoder," in *Jämmerdal och fröjdesal*, ed. Eva Österberg (Stockholm: Atlantis, 1997), 287–305; Fabian Persson, "I hopen av de ödmjuka ansikten: Klient-patronskapet under stormaktstiden," in *Tid och tillit: En vänbok till Eva Österberg*, ed. Irene Andersson, Kenneth Johansson, Marie Lindstedt Cronberg (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2002), 389–403; Gudrun Andersson, Esbjörn Larsson, and Patrik Winton, ed., *Med börd, svärd och pengar: Eliters manifestation, maktutövning och reproduktion 1650-1900* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2003); Peter Ullgren, *Lantadel: Adliga godsägare i Östergötland och Skåne vid 1600-talets slut* (Lund: Sisyfos, 2004); Svante Norrhem, *Kvinnor vid maktens sida: 1632-1772* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2007); Charlotta Wolff, *Noble Conceptions of Politics in Eighteenth-Century Sweden (ca 1740-1790)* (Helsinki: Finish Literature Society, 2008); Bo Eriksson, *Statstjänare och jordägare: Adelsideologi i Per Brahe den äldres "Oeconomia"* (Stockholm: Dialogos, 2008); Anu Lahtinen, "Kärlek och förpliktelse: Aristokratiska systrars brevväxling under 1500-talet," *Folkmålsstudier* 47 (2009): 45–66; Anu Lahtinen, *Anpassning, förhandling, motstånd: Kvinnliga aktörer i släkten Fleming 1470-1620*, trans. Camilla Frostell (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2009); Johanna Ilmakunnas, *Ett ståndsmässigt liv: Familjen von Fersens livsstil på 1700-talet*, trans. Camilla Frostell (Helsinki: Svenska litteratursällskapet i Finland, 2012); Björn Asker, "Aristokratiska hovjungfrur och nyadliga hovjunkrar: Adeln vid änkedrottning Hedvig Eleonoras hov," in *Fragment ur arkiven: Festskrift till Jan Brunius*, ed. Marie Lennersand, Åsa Karlsson, and Henrik Klackenborg (Stockholm: Riksarkivet, 2013), 108–121; Alexander Engström, *Olikhetens praktiker: Adlig begravningskultur i Sverige ca 1630-1680* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2019); Johanna Thorelli, *De tjänstvilliga vännernas samhälle: Abraham Brahe och den svenska eliten 1590-1630* (Gothenburg: Gothenburg University, 2023).

general trends, such as the cultural turn.⁵⁸ Scholars have become less concerned with rigorously assessing whether people belonged to an aristocracy or nobility. What holds greater significance is how historical subjects understood and expressed themselves. The emancipation from a dualistic view of history arguably facilitated these developments. However, as discussed below, the dualistic view did not entirely disappear but instead morphed into another form.

A New Dichotomy and Notions of a Swedish *Sonderweg*

The transformation of the dualistic view of history becomes evident in Jan Samuelson's 1993 dissertation *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde?* (Aristocrat or Refined Peasant?). Samuelson built upon Kurt Ågren's model and analysed social, economic, political, and cultural aspects of the sixteenth-century nobility to demonstrate its heterogeneous nature. On the one hand, the boundaries between aristocrats and "refined peasants" were fluid. On the other hand, the differences between an aristocrat in the council of the realm and a provincial peasant who enjoyed noble status and privileges of tax-exemption could be enormous.⁵⁹ Besides posing a challenge to the old dualistic view (monarchy versus aristocracy), Samuelson addressed another dualistic view articulated within state formation research. Scholars of state formation tended to bring monarchs, aristocrats, and nobles together as forming an "above" discussed in terms of the State, Military State, or Power State. They emphasised the coercive, exploitative, and controlling features of the military state and its representatives, especially in the seventeenth century when burdens of conscription and levies increased. The interests of state-builders "above" were thus contrasted with the interests of peasants, the majority that formed the "below."⁶⁰

This marked a reframing of the dualistic view of history. While earlier scholars emphasised an enduring clash between monarchy and aristocracy (or nobility),

⁵⁸ Hamish Scott, "The Early Modern European Nobility and its Contested Historiographies, c. 1950-1980," in *Contested Spaces of Nobility in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Matthew P. Romaniello and Charles Lipp (Albington: Ashgate Publishing, 2011), 11-39.

⁵⁹ Jan Samuelson, *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde? Det svenska frälsets ekonomi, politik och sociala förbindelser under tiden 1523-1611* (Lund: Lund University, 1993), 22, 30-31, 222-254.

⁶⁰ Jan Lindegren, "The Swedish 'Military State', 1560-1720," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 10, no. 4 (1985): 305-336; Sven A. Nilsson, *De stora krigens tid: Om Sverige som militärstat och bondesamhälle* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1990), 14-26; Sven A. Nilsson, "Politisk mobilisering i den svenska militärstaten," *Scandia* 60, no. 2 (1994): 119-121, 124, 127, 136, 139, 150; Martin Linde, *Statsmakt och bondemotstånd: Allmog och överhet under stora nordiska kriget* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2000), 27-28; Joakim Scherp, *De ofrälse och makten: En institutionell studie av riksdagen och de ofrälse ståndens politik i maktodelningsfrågor 1660-1682* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2013), 28-31, 296, 309-312.

the principal idea was now that "the history of Sweden over several centuries may be described as struggle between peasants' endeavours to keep the produce of their farms, and the crown's and nobility's desire to appropriate the agrarian surplus."⁶¹ However, Jan Samuelson argued that the sixteenth-century nobility was so diverse and stratified that it could not simply be described as forming an "above." The nobility was structured as a pyramid, with an aristocratic elite at the top and a nobility at the bottom whose situation did not differ radically from that of freeholding peasants.⁶²

The influential work of Eva Österberg contributed in transforming the dualistic view by questioning state formation as a coercive process driven from "above." Österberg launched an interactionist model of interpretation and argued that state formation took place through institutionalised bargaining and negotiation between peasant communities and state representatives. Accordingly, the early modern period was characterised by a political culture of negotiation, interaction, and dialogue which influenced the shape of Swedish society in the modern era. Yeomen could make their voices heard and gain a hearing for their grievances during state expansion through the institutionalised system of meetings at different levels of society (at the *Riksdag*, hundred council, and parish meetings). A pattern for handling socio-political problems developed, explaining the supposed lack of organised violent rebellions in Sweden during the early modern period. As Österberg suggests, "many of the conditions of the Swedish Model are therefore met by this small-scale farming community of reasonably independent peasants."⁶³

⁶¹ Christer Winberg, "Another Route to Modern Society: The Advancement of the Swedish Peasantry," in *Agrarian Society in History: Essays in Honour of Magnus Mörner*, ed. Mats Lundahl and Thommy Svensson (London: Routledge, 1990), 62.

⁶² Samuelson, *Aristokrat eller förädlad bonde?*, 260, 262.

⁶³ Interpretations that emphasise pressures from above tend to explain the supposed lack of rebellions in terms of the Power State's success. Through propaganda, coercion, control, and integration of the people in the exploitative system, the state representatives created an unwillingness and inability among peasants to rise against central authorities. Eva Österberg, "Folklig mentalitet och statlig makt: Perspektiv på 1500- och 1600-talens Sverige," *Scandia* 58, no. 1 (1992): 85; Eva Österberg, "Vardagens sträva samförstånd: Bondepolitik i den svenska modellen från vasatid till frihetstid," in *Tänka, tycka, tro: Svensk historia underifrån*, ed. Gunnar Broberg, Ulla Wikander, and Klas Åmark (Stockholm: Ordfront, 1993), 134–141; Eva Österberg, "State Formation and the People: The Swedish Model in Perspective," in *Gemeinde, Reformation und Widerstand: Festschrift für Peter Blickle zum 60. Geburtstag*, ed. Heinrich R. Schmidt, André Holenstein, and Andreas Würgler (Tübingen: Bibliotheca Academica Verlag, 1998), 124; Scherp, *De ofrälse och makten*: 296–297. Cf. Øystein Rian, "Conclusion," in *A Revolution from Above? The Power State of 16th and 17th Century Scandinavia*, ed. Leon Jespersen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2000), 333–338. Concerning the two approaches, in which coercion or interaction serve as the respective watchwords, see Peter Ericsson, "Mordet på fogden Warenberg: Våldsam interaktion mellan stat och lokalsamhälle i Karl XII:s Sverige," in *Allt på ett bräde: Stat, ekonomi och bondeoffer: En vänbok till Jan Lindegren*, ed. Peter Ericsson, Fredrik Thisner, Patrik Winton, and

These ideas reproduced notions of a Swedish *Sonderweg*. A linear narrative of liberal democracy has been constructed that begins in the sixteenth century with free, independent, tax-paying peasants acting as the carriers of modernity. In other countries, it was the bourgeoisie that acted as the counterweight to monarchs and aristocrats in the development of democratic states. In Sweden, this role was attributed to the peasantry, standing up for their interests throughout the centuries. The peasant became, and has remained, a symbolic figurehead in the cultural construction of a Nordic and Swedish *Sonderweg*.⁶⁴ Scholars have traced the long lines of consensual democracy, teleologically seeking the roots of social democracy and the Swedish Model, comprised of the welfare state and consensual culture that explain a supposed lack of violence and confrontation in Swedish political history. As Mary Hilson argues, the political history of the free peasant has become a "national tradition in its own right."⁶⁵

The exceptionalist narratives of free peasants appeared in the nationalist writings of Fryxell and Geijer and were reproduced in the works of twentieth-century historians. There are differences, however. Österberg stressed that she did not envision early modern local communities as idylls. She acknowledged that power was distributed unevenly and that those without property faced difficulties that propertied farmers did not. Romantic idealisation was abandoned but the notion of the free peasant as "an actively participating *subject* in the political processes" affirmed.⁶⁶ The landowning farmer, actively participating

Andreas Åkerlund (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2013), 257–269; Nils Erik Villstrand, "Monolog eller dialog? Den tidigmoderna svenska staten i möte med sina undersåtar," *Historisk tidskrift för Finland* 102, no. 3 (2017): 458–479; Petri Karonen and Marko Hakanen, "Personal Agency and State Building in Sweden (1560–1720)," in *Personal Agency at the Swedish Age of Greatness 1560–1720*, ed. Petri Karonen and Marko Hakanen (Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society, 2017), 13–44.

⁶⁴ Francis G. Castles, "Barrington Moore's Thesis and Swedish Political Development," *Government and Opposition* 8 (1973): 313, 317–318, 323, 329–330; Timothy A. Tilton, "The Social Origins of Liberal Democracy: The Swedish Case," *The American Political Science Review* 68, no. 2 (1974): 565; Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, "Introduction: The Cultural Construction of Norden," in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, ed. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 1–8; Lars Trägårdh, "Statist Individualism: On the Culturality of the Nordic Welfare State," in *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, ed. Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth (Oslo: Scandinavian University Press, 1997), 258.

⁶⁵ Mary Hilson, "A Consensual Democracy? The Historical Roots of the Swedish Model," in *Political Outsiders in Swedish History, 1848–1932*, ed. Lars Edgren and Magnus Olofsson (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 135–136, 141; Stefan Nyzell, "Sweden, Country of Consensus—A Teleological History? An Essay on Social and Political Collective Violence in Swedish History," in *Political Outsiders in Swedish History, 1848–1932*, ed. Lars Edgren and Magnus Olofsson (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 110–113.

⁶⁶ Eva Österberg, "Compromise Instead of Conflict? Patterns of Contact Between Local Peasants and the Early Modern State: Sweden in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries," in *Agrarian Society in History: Essays in Honour of Magnus Mörner*, ed. Mats Lundahl and Thommy Svensson (London: Routledge, 1990), 274, 278; Bo Stråth,

in local *ting* and national *Riksdag* politics, embodied the refined Swedish peasant with agency in a political culture of dialogue, establishing a lineage to the present political situation. Naturally, the *Sonderweg* thesis has not stood unchallenged.⁶⁷ However, the notion of an early modern bargaining state, with forceful peasants as bargaining agents, remain strong. Swedish and international scholars stress that farmers formed a strong political group with which the rulers of Sweden needed to bargain aside from the, in a European perspective, comparatively small aristocracy and poor nobility with limited control over the peasants.⁶⁸

An Aristocracy of Peasants

Nineteenth-century Swedish historians were not unique in constructing national histories, seeking to define the people, and projecting Swedishness onto the yeomen. In European historiography generally, nobility was seen as incompatible with modernisation. In France there was a tendency to align national identity with monarchy in a dualistic and antagonistic relation to the nobility, while German historiography tended to present peasants and urban elites as oppressed groups who embodied the forces of modernisation.⁶⁹ In Denmark and Norway the national histories resembled those in Sweden. The people consisted of free peasants while nobles pursued self-interest and did not contribute to the

"The Cultural Construction of Equality in Norden," in *Egalitarianism in Scandinavia: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Synnøve Bendixsen, Mary Bente Bringslid, and Halvard Vike (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 49.

⁶⁷ Börje Harnesk, "Den svenska modellens tidigmoderna rötter?" *Historisk tidskrift* (2002): 78–90; Erik Bengtsson, "The Swedish *Sonderweg* in Question: Democratization and Inequality in Comparative Perspective, c. 1750–1920," *Past & Present* 244, no. 1 (2019): 123–161.

⁶⁸ Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State* (London: Verso, 2013 [first published 1974]), 180; H. G. Koenigsberger, "Monarchies and Parliaments in Early Modern Europe: *Dominum Regale* or *Dominium Politicum et Regale*," *Theory and Society* 5, no 2 (1978): 198, 213; Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990–1992* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 27 and 136; Jan Glete, *War and the State in Early Modern Europe: Spain, the Dutch Republic and Sweden as Fiscal Military States, 1500–1660* (London: Routledge, 2002), 177–212; Johan Holm, *Konstruktionen av en stormakt: Kungamakt, skattebönder och statsbildning 1595 till 1640* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2007); Mats Hallenberg, Johan Holm, and Dan Johansson, "Organization, Legitimation, Participation: State Formation as a Dynamic Process—The Swedish Example, c. 1523–1680," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 33, no 2 (2008): 247–268.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Dewald, "French Nobles and the Historians, 1820–1960," in *The French Nobility in the Eighteenth Century: Reassessments and New Approaches*, ed. Jay M. Smith (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 305–332; Ronald G. Asch, *Nobilities in Transition, 1550–1700: Courtiers and Rebels in Britain and Europe* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2003), 5.

common interest of the nation.⁷⁰ Fryxell challenged this view. However, he did not deny the notion of a Swedish *Sonderweg*, where peasants enjoyed an almost unrivalled degree of freedom from noble oppression. This idea, based on the fact that a comparatively high number of Swedish peasants owned their land, has been bearing in much scholarship of Swedish state formation. Landowning was the basis of political representation, and the distribution of land and political participation set Sweden apart from Denmark.⁷¹ While less than one per cent of Danish peasants owned their land, about fifty per cent of Swedish farmers were tax-paying freeholders.⁷² This was a defining feature of the Swedish bargaining state in which rulers and ruled engaged in a shared political culture of bargaining, facilitating the extraction of resources needed for Sweden to emerge as a great European power.

Aristocrats, nobles, and peasants all had a part to play in this bargaining state. However, the dualistic view continues to exert influence. It has been argued that in the sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century *Riksdag* there were three major bargaining parties who could form alliances to carry out political or financial reforms: the king, the nobles, and the tax-paying peasants. Yet, even if nobles and peasants could have shared interests, they never became allies against the king. The structural opposition between the estates placed the king in a favourable and strong position as he could balance interest groups against each other by choosing either estate as his partner.⁷³ However, in practice, there were instances when other estates acted forcefully at the *Riksdag*, for example, dukes, clergymen, and burghers. Furthermore, cooperation between various estates, including

⁷⁰ Aronsson, Fulsås, Haapala, and Jensen, "Nordic National Histories," 263–264; see also Peter Norring, "Histories of the Free Peasant in Finnish and Swedish Historical Research, ca. 1800–1980," in *Swedish and Finnish Historiographies of the Swedish Realm, c.1520–1809: Shared Past, Different Interpretations?* ed. Petri Karonen and Miia Kuha (Albington: Routledge, 2023), 150–170.

⁷¹ Knud J. V. Jespersen, "Repression and Representation: Political Culture in Early Modern Scandinavia," in *Realities of Representation: State Building in Early Modern Europe and European America*, ed. Maija Jansson (Basingstoke: Palgrave & MacMillan, 2007), 133–147; cf. Leon Jespersen, "The Constitutional and Administrative Situation," in *A Revolution from Above? The Power State of 16th and 17th Century Scandinavia*, ed. Leon Jespersen (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2000), 44–45.

⁷² Ulla Koskinen, "The Story of Aggressive and Violent Peasant Elites in the North," in *Aggressive and Violent Peasant Elites in the Nordic Countries, c.1500–1700*, ed. Ulla Koskinen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 3; Winberg, "Another Route to Modern Society," 50–51.

⁷³ Glete, *War and State*, 192; Johan Holm, "Att välja sin fiende–Allmogens konflikter och allianser i riksdagen 1595–1635," *Historisk tidskrift* 123, no. 1 (2003): 29–50; Holm, *Konstruktionen av en stormakt*, 116–120. The argument is very similar to Norbert Elias's idea of a royal mechanism, see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, ed. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Stephen Mennell, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 313–344.

peasant and noble representatives, occasionally occurred. There were certainly tensions between estates, but interests diverged within the estates and could cut across estate boundaries. Peasants and nobles could thus become allies against, for example, the clergy.⁷⁴

Scholars have been attuned to this variance within social categories. As we have seen, social historians explored the differentiation within the noble estate, and peasants have similarly been acknowledged as a stratified group. Geijer's refined peasant was the *skattebonde*, a freeholding farmer who paid taxes to the Crown and cultivated the farmstead that he owned himself.⁷⁵ But there were two other major groups of peasants: the *kronobonde*, who was a tenant of the Crown and cultivated Crown lands; and the *frälsebonde*, a tenant who cultivated lands owned by a noble lord, who was in principle exempt from taxation. There were also *skattefrälsebönder*, freeholders whose land became tax-exempt under a noble lord due to abalienation of Crown land, and *rusthållare*, farmers exempted from taxation in exchange for providing a rider to the cavalry. Scholars have debated the extent to which these groups were differently affected by the state's expansion, war efforts, and resource extraction.⁷⁶

The acknowledgement of peasants as a socially, economically, and politically stratified group has raised the issue of determining which peasants were politically represented at the *Riksdag*. The term peasantry has thus been recognised as facing similar inadequacies as the terms aristocracy and nobility, serving as flattening concepts that impose homogeneity on heterogeneous groups. Rural society was structured as a pyramid, and scholars have identified a stratum of wealthy peasant elites who promoted their own interests at the *Riksdag*. This group has occasionally been described as a *bondearistokrati* (peasant aristocracy) due to their wealth and office holding.⁷⁷ In 1986, Carl Johan Gardell argued that provincial and court judges from the peasantry formed a peasant aristocracy or peasant oligarchy (*bondearistokrati* or *bondeoligarki*) on the island of Gotland in the early seventeenth century (at that time, the island was a Danish province, but in 1645, it became

⁷⁴ Scherp, *De ofrälse och makten*, 112–127; Alexander Isacson, *Defining Dukeship: The Problem of Royal Spares and Dynasty Formation in Sweden, 1556–1622* (Örebro: Örebro University, 2023), 26–27, 228.

⁷⁵ Hall, *Den svenskaste historien*, 111.

⁷⁶ Margareta Revera, "1600-talsbönderna och deras herrar: Om jordäggande, skatter och samhällsförändring i ljustet av nyare forskning," in *Den svenska juridikens uppblomstring i 1600-talets politiska, kulturella och religiösa stormaktssamhälle*, ed. Göran Inger (Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus, 1984), 15–24 and 35–37; Lindegren, "The Swedish Military State," 320–324; Linde, *Statsmakt och bondemotstånd*, 63–64.

⁷⁷ Eino Jutikkala, *Bonden i Finland genom tiderna* (Stockholm: LT, 1963), 92; Lars-Olof Larsson, *Arvet efter Gustav Vasa: Berättelsen om fyra kungar och ett rike* (Stockholm: Prisma, 2005), 320; Koskinen, "The Story of Aggressive and Violent Peasant Elites," 8.

part of the Swedish realm).⁷⁸ In a review essay, Gardell was criticised for using a paradoxical and deceptive term, and the reviewer suggested that these judges were well-to-do farmers (*storbönder*) rather than aristocrats or oligarchs.⁷⁹ When Jens Lerbom revisited the subject in 2002, he employed Max Weber's theories to define these wealthy and politically influential peasants as a status group and local elite.⁸⁰ The contested term peasant aristocracy was thus discarded in favour of a concept with specific criteria.

Although peasant aristocracy is a rare compound in the historiography, it has not been completely abandoned. In an article from 2020, Erik Bengtsson and Mats Olsson suggest that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century farmer politicians at the *Riksdag* were wealthy and elitist to such an extent that we might characterise them as "peasant aristocrats."⁸¹ Scholars have shown that it was primarily landowning and propertied peasants who negotiated with state representatives, strengthening their position at the expense of the rural poor and unpropertied. Affluent farmers bargained and financed the military state by paying taxes, while the propertyless generally lacked a political voice in local, regional, and national assemblies, were conscripted, and sent to the front. Swedish state formation thus depended on both bargaining and coercion.⁸² This view challenges the notion of state formation as either a top-down or bottom-up process. Wealthy farmers, whether freeholders or tenants, essentially formed a peasant elite, a top layer among those usually subsumed into the category of "below." These peasant elites accumulated wealth, successfully claimed an exclusive right to participate in decision-making, held community offices, and married strategically to maintain their position. Cooperation, integration, coercion, and resistance were all prevalent repertoires of state building, involving relations between peasant elites, representatives of central authority, and other groups.⁸³

⁷⁸ Carl Johan Gardell, *Handelskompani och bondearistokrati: En studie i den sociala strukturen på Gotland omkring 1620* (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1986).

⁷⁹ Tryggve Siltberg, "Tingsdomarna på Gotland–aristokrati eller storbönder?" *Historisk tidskrift* no. 3 (1989): 386.

⁸⁰ Jens Lerbom, *Mellan två riken: Integration, politisk kultur och förnationella identiteter på Gotland 1500–1700* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2003), 173–185.

⁸¹ Erik Bengtsson and Mats Olsson, "Peasant Aristocrats? Wealth, Social Structure and the Politics of Swedish Farmer Parliamentarians 1769–1845," *Scandinavian Journal of History* 45, no. 5 (2020): 573–585.

⁸² Mats Hallenberg and Johan Holm, *Man ur huse: Hur krig, upplopp och förhandlingar påverkade svensk statsbildning i tidigmodern tid* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2016), 248–252, 263–268.

⁸³ Koskinen, "The Story of Aggressive and Violent Peasant Elites," 1–11; Ulla Koskinen, Knut Dørum, Mats Hallenberg, Johan Holm, Kimmo Katajala, Tiina Miettinen, and Øystein Rian, "Conclusion: Resisting, Cooperating, and Fighting," in *Aggressive and Violent Peasant Elites in the Nordic Countries, c.1500–1700*, ed. Ulla Koskinen (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 261–272; Knut Dørum, Mats Hallenberg, and Kimmo Katajala,

The freedom loving peasants were thus essentially members of a peasant aristocracy who by different means sought to uphold or improve their status.

Conclusion

In the first half of the nineteenth century, the meaning and significance of aristocracy became increasingly contested, within as well as outside of historiography. The term had signified a specific form of state but was now also applied to a social group that needed to be defined. Generally, it was linked to oppression, and those belonging to the aristocracy were not seen as forming part of the nation. Anders Fryxell's revisionist attempt to include the aristocracy in the concept of the people reflected a moment of stress in the 1840s but also promoted an enduring dualistic view of history in which different social groups were pitted against each other in the struggle for power and resources. Twentieth-century social and cultural historians concerned with qualifications and precision to aid historical analysis both narrowed and expanded the implications of aristocracy. They questioned flattening concepts by specifying the differences between people in an overarching social category. Their explorations of social, economic, political, and cultural aspects demonstrated the fluid boundaries between aristocrats, noblemen, and peasants. However, the dualistic tendency in combination with the critical examination of group compositions meant that the term aristocracy could be applied to new groups of people. The figurehead of national history and in the persistent idea of a Swedish *Sonderweg* was the freeholding peasant who could be described as a peasant aristocrat. What occurred in the wake of the French Revolution thus echoes through the historiographic developments in Sweden. Aristocracy became a term for describing certain social relations, people, and their activities, which made it a fluid term, available for historians to claim and use in different ways in their historical analyses.

"Repertoires of State Building from Below in the Nordic Countries, c.1500-1800," in *Bringing the People Back In: State Building from Below in the Nordic Countries ca.1500-1800*, ed. Knut Dørum, Mats Hallenberg, and Kimmo Katajala (London: Routledge, 2021), 12–18.

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