

Revolution, Eschatology, and Myth. Religious and Nature Metaphors of Temporality in Swedish Socialist Press in the Years of the Russian Revolutions



REDESCRIPTIONS

Political Thought, Conceptual History and Feminist Theory

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This article studies religious and nature metaphors of temporality in Swedish socialist press in the years of the Russian Revolutions. News reports as well as theoretical and agitational texts on the inevitability of the socialist revolution filled the Swedish socialist press, from young socialist/syndicalist to left social democratic and social democratic, in the years following the revolutionary years 1917–1918. The aim of the article is to study how the deterministic and voluntaristic aspects of the concept of revolution were harmonized, contrasted, and expressed through a metaphorical language in Swedish socialist press, ranging from reformist to revolutionary. Theoretical inspiration comes from Benjamin, Eliade, Koselleck, Löwith, and, not least, Löwy and their reflections on temporal relations between myth and eschatology as well as linear and cyclical time in modernity. The study shows that reactions of Swedish socialists to the Russian Revolution and the concept of revolution formulated in response to these paradigmatic events were imbued with a teleology of necessity. While the young socialist and left social democratic concept of revolution was largely influenced by a romantic revolutionary current of ideas, entailing that cyclical temporality was a guarantee that the revolution would almost necessarily come in the future, cyclical time often took on a negative quality in the social democratic press. Neither the February nor the October Revolution were seen as meaningful events in

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themselves. Instead, they were defined in relation to notions of the world revolution, the social revolution, the history of social progress, and the relation between the present, the past, and the future. The philosophy of history expressed in the writings of Swedish socialists also amounts to a kind of resistance against history not unlike the one-sidedly mythic understanding of history. This was achieved by reintroducing a kind of myth of eternal return into a teleological and eschatological conception of history.

INTRODUCTION

On 8 March 1917, according to the Gregorian calendar, a revolution broke out in Russia, an event that would become known as the February Revolution.¹ While the revolution was much anticipated by European socialists, it was also described as sudden and startling. At the time, the expectation of revolution was often expressed in deterministic language in socialist circles (Arvidsson 1979, 48–52; Kautsky 1979, 80).² In accordance with a Marxist political analysis of the contemporary society, a political, socialist revolution was thus depicted as inevitable. Some six months later, another revolution broke out in Russia, the October Revolution, in which the Bolshevik Party seized power and began instituting measures that would eventually lead to the creation of a socialist Soviet Union. In the following years, revolutions would also be attempted in Germany, Hungary, Finland, and elsewhere, only to be quashed by violent opposition.

There was no political revolution in Sweden, the land of focus in the article. Instead, reformism had its definitive breakthrough with the introduction of universal and equal suffrage in the direct years following the revolutions abroad, 1919–1921 (Kan 2005; Schmidt 1996). Nevertheless, news reports, as well as theoretical and agitational texts on the inevitability of a socialist revolution in Sweden or the world at large, filled the Swedish socialist press, ranging from social democratic, syndicalist, and anarchist, often and from now on referred to as ‘young socialists’ (*ungsocialister*) to ‘left social democrats’ (*vänstersocialister*). The left social democrats (Sveriges Socialdemokratiska Vänsterparti, SSV) were an organization within the social democratic party that in March 2017 was constituted as a new party and as a radical socialist alternative to the ‘mother party’. It became a communist party in 1919, affiliated with Comintern (Alm 2008; Jonsson 2017; Marklund 2006). This article focuses on the Swedish socialist press in that broad sense.

During the time of the Russian revolutions, the ties between political press and parties were particularly strong in Sweden. In fact, Lundström has even noted that among social democratic and left social democratic press, the newspapers were directly and explicitly part of the parties’ political agitation (2001, 50). A somewhat similar observation can be made about the syndicalist and young socialist press as well, although, as we will return to, it also had more room for uncertainty in interpretation

¹ According to the Julian calendar, that was used in the Russian Empire, the revolution broke out on 23 February.

² German social democrat Eduard Bernstein’s concept of revolution has sometimes been interpreted as deterministic. Similarly, there are elements of determinism in the evolutionary-oriented syndicalist concept of revolution.

and sometimes even almost contradictory interpretations of an event. In the same spirit, Ledin has concluded that the influence of the labor movement on public language in 20th Century Sweden has been enormous (1995, 12).

With a conceptual-historical understanding following Koselleck of how modern political concepts both reflect and construct their contemporaries, I want to emphasize that the socialist press in a broad sense constitutes excellent material for the study of opinion building and propaganda (2004, 159). This theoretical understanding leads to the assumption that it is in the political press, during politically tumultuous times as the one of the Russian revolutions and the Great War, that we find the struggle over the concept of revolution in its most condensed form, both within and between the papers.

While research on the Russian revolutions as political events and their reception in neighboring countries is extensive, the opposite can be said of the conceptual history of revolution during these years. Even though the use of the term revolution was remarkably often filled with mythical and religious connotations when used in the press, in line with the somewhat scarce interest by historians to study the semantic and ideological intersection of religion and politics, research has not paid much attention to these aspects (Bosco 2019; Jonsson 2017; Nygaard 2012, 2022; Paetau 1990). There are some exceptions, however. For instance, both Nygaard and Jonsson have approached the metaphorical and mythical connotations of the concept of revolution when examining its temporality. In their respective studies, they have found that when the modern concept of revolution was filled with mythical and messianic associations, the dominant linear conception of time was often complicated. Thus, a cyclical view of history was incorporated into the linear narrative and contemporary events were understood as repetition, learning process and return to a mythical past (Jonsson 2017, 313–320; Nygaard 2022, 45). This article aims to add to that research.

Although conceptual-historical, semantic or other linguistically oriented studies of the reception of the Russian revolutions from a Swedish perspective are few, there are several historians who have studied the revolution from a press-historical perspective or with a focus on the historical consciousness that can be discerned in the Swedish press' reporting. Alm's chapter on the historical consciousness of revolutionary reporting in the political press across the ideological spectrum should be mentioned here, as well as Marklund's article on the different phases of reception (2008; 2006). From an international perspective, in recent years the already mentioned Nygaard, Traverso, and, not least, Löwy have made valuable contributions to interpreting the ideological, rhetoric, and semantic traces that characterize European socialism in a broad sense in the years around the Russian revolutions (Löwy 1992; Löwy & Sayre 2001; Nygaard 2012, 2022; Traverso 2021). In a recent publication, Traverso examines how the intellectual history of the socialist revolution has been shaped by and shaped actual revolutions from the 19th century to the present. Of particular interest for this article is his discussion of how the temporality of revolution has been represented in various forms in history. The chapter dealing with the expression 'the locomotive of history' shows in an insightful way how temporality, socialist visions of revolution and the industrial revolution were intimately connected (2021).

The aim of the article is to study how the deterministic and voluntaristic aspects of the concept of revolution were harmonized, contrasted, and expressed through a metaphorical language in Swedish socialist press. By examining eschatological and cyclical myths emerging from on the one hand a religious language embedded in a

political one, on the other hand metaphors of nature, the article also aims to shed light on the temporality of the concept of revolution and the relationship between cyclical and linear time in political language in a time to a large degree steeped in the idea of progress.³

UNDERSTANDING TEMPORALITY—REFLECTIONS ON CYCLICAL AND MYTHICAL TIME

To interpret the mythical and eschatological metaphors with which the revolution was portrayed and to gain a deeper understanding of what the different temporalities of the concept of revolution meant conceptually, politically, and from the perspective of history of ideas, I turn to theorists such as Koselleck, Eliade, Benjamin, and Löwith and reflect on the social and ideological currents that have been crucial in shaping the rhetoric of the concept of revolution. The common feature of all these thinkers is their attention, albeit in different respects, to the temporality of modern time and in particular to the ways in which linear and cyclical time correspond, confront each other, and, in different ways, are significant in relation to the notion of possible political action.

In addition, Steinmetz and Freeden have stressed the importance of studying the performativity of political concepts because, among other things, it allows the researcher to examine the emotive rhetoric that surrounds the use of political concepts (2017, 2). Considering that emotive and moral rhetoric are prominent features in the metaphoric language of the concept of revolution in fact, one could state that one reason why actual or desired revolutions were presented in a metaphor-ridden rhetoric was precisely to evoke emotions in the reader, I too want to emphasize the importance of researching those connotations.

In *Meaning and History*, Löwith describes modern historical understanding as an amalgam of Christian themes and a modern concept of time. This is why, according to Löwith, modern historiography tends to portray human history as an eschatological narrative of human progress (1949, 18). Similarly, Koselleck highlights the linear and eschatological character of modern temporality but also emphasizes that modern political and social concepts still harbor an older understanding of cyclic time (2004, 92).

In Benjamin's 'Theses on the Concept of History', cyclical time, manifested through the recurrent defeat of the losers in history, emerges as a revolutionary spark. Benjamin criticizes modernity's notion of inexorable progress, arguing that it has duped social democracy and made the progress of fascism possible. Thus, Benjamin places his hope in a 'messianic age' and that both historians and the working class will seize these messianic flashes of energy of the past to justify their struggle in the present. In Benjamin's temporal reflections, cyclical time is not about repetition nor is it about pure nostalgia but about capturing a condensed time, given a materialist view of history (1955). Löwy situates Benjamin's thinking in a political romantic-utopian context, characterized by the apparent contradiction of reconciling nostalgia and forward looking. Löwy's studies of what he has referred to as 'revolutionary romanticism' provide a background to the study of revolutionary metaphors (1992, 32; Löwy & Sayre 2001, 58).

3 Nämnen Bertel Nygaard här.

Lastly, Eliade examines the presence of cyclical temporality, usually associated with premodern times, in modernity through the presence of the myth of eternal return (1989). Since this particular myth is often found in the metaphors of the Swedish socialists' concepts of revolution, Eliade, together with the above-mentioned thinkers, provide a hermeneutic background for interpreting the metaphors of revolution.

In short, Eliade argues that a cyclical concept of time has survived and is still being negotiated in modernity. During the Middle Ages, largely dominated by eschatological anticipation of the end time, the linear concept of time was supplemented by a cyclical concept, explaining the repetitiousness of history (1989, 144). Moreover, Eliade suggests that even in postenlightenment times, as the linearity of a *Heilsgeschichte* has given way to the secularized linearity of progress, modern man continues to turn to the myth of eternal return, still struggling with the meaning of singular events. Just as the singular event was never enough for archaic man, so modern man too senses that the event is meaningless if not tied to a chain of repetition (1989, 147). Eliade writes:

The reappearance of cyclical theories in contemporary thought is pregnant with meaning. Incompetent as we are to pass judgment upon their validity, we shall confine ourselves to observing that the formulation, in modern terms, of an archaic myth betrays at least the desire to find a meaning and a transhistorical justification for historical events. (1955)

However, how does myth in general and the myth of eternal return in particular relate to eschatology, a phenomenon seemingly so prominent in the revolutionary rhetoric under study? For Eliade, as can be seen from the above discussion, there is no opposition between them. Rather, the cyclical and mythical conception of time is an essential moment of the eschatological, progressive understanding of history characterizing modernity.

A FEW WORDS ON SOURCES AND METHOD

Drawing on said thinkers, I will now examine how and why the Swedish socialists' concept of revolution was filled with eschatological and mythical connotations in the years around the Russian revolutions. I will present said rhetoric thematically and not by organization, since it is common features across organizational boundaries that are in primary focus and not ideological differences between the organizations. Nevertheless, diachronic and synchronic changes and continuities within as well as between the organizations will be sketched, enabling a discussion on the relation between the metaphoric-laden rhetoric of revolution and the newspapers' and parties' understanding of the revolutionary events and the concept of revolution in general.

The sources of the study are the social democratic newspapers *Social-Demokraten* (the Social-Democrat) and *Arbetet* (Work), as well as the party's ideological journal *Tiden* (The Times), the left social democratic newspaper *Folkets Dagblad Politiken* (The People's Daily Politics, from 1918 called only *Politiken*, Politics), and the young socialist/syndicalist weekly newspaper *Brand* (Fire). The years covered are 1916–1920, with special attention given to the year of the Russian revolutions 1917 and the two, from a European perspective, revolutionary years of 1918 and 1919. To describe actual, desired, or hypothetical revolutions with metaphors drawn from the Bible or from nature was mainly reserved for young socialist and left social democratic writers, although the phenomenon also occurred in the social democratic press. This means

that most of the texts used in the study derive from the newspapers *Brand* and *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*.

At the time of the Russian revolutions, the Social Democratic Party was an avowed reformist party, while the left social democrats were more ambivalent on the issue. The young socialists advocated an extraparlimentary struggle for socialism in the first place and, as with the left social democrats, there was room within the organization for different views of the revolution (Kan 2005; Schmidt 1996). A study of how the organizations' press perceived the political revolutions of the time, as well as how desired or undesired revolutions were presented, provides a nuanced picture of the extent to which the 'official' revolutionary view and ideology corresponded with the concept of revolution that was presented through the press as propaganda.

The study is organized according to the main themes that emerged when the metaphors were studied more closely and that in various ways are related to the idea of the revolution as part of a cyclical and/or linear time, revolution as rebirth and salvation, revolution as apocalypse, revolution by necessity of nature, revolution as a force of nature, and, finally, the necessity of revolution and the cycle of nature.

The metaphor-driven writings on which the study is based are neither representative of the newspapers' writings on revolution in general nor of their news coverage of contemporary revolutions. They have been deliberately selected for their evocative nature and, not least, for their use of metaphor to address temporality in different ways. It is in this type of text that the temporality of the concept of revolution, and through it, the notion of revolution as deterministic or voluntaristic, emerges most strongly. Moreover, it is in this type of text that readers encounter an appeal whose purpose seems to be to arouse emotional investment in actual, desired, or hypothetical revolutions.

THE REVOLUTION AS REBIRTH AND SALVATION

In 1917 and 1918, the newspapers published an enormous amount of material on the Russian revolutions, as well as on the revolutions in Finland and Germany. During particularly politically concentrated periods, revolutions in various respects were written about in every issue and almost on every page of the newspapers (Jonsson 2017). The revolution or rather the concept of revolution thus appeared in news reports, essays, editorials, short stories, and appeals, and the overall impression on the reader is overwhelming. Revolution was everywhere, threatening or promising a different future. In this flood of texts focusing on the revolution, the texts in which the revolution was dressed up in mythical or eschatological garb are particularly prominent. Not because of quantity, for there are not that many of them if you look at the whole, but because of their suggestive form and ability to both address the political present and connect this present temporally with the past and the future in meaningful and emotive ways.

Initially the Swedish social democrats, left social democrats, young socialists, and syndicalists all considered the February Revolution a bourgeois political revolution. As such, they welcomed it while understanding it mainly within the framework of a stage-based theory of history. According to this theory, the socialist revolution would be preceded by a bourgeois one (Alm 2008, 144–146; Jonsson 2017, 127). As the Russian empire was perceived to be feudal and reactionary, the revolution was seen as a first step toward a just society. Revolutionary enthusiasm was evident in the spirited news

writing of Swedish socialists, as well as in their writing in general, where discussions of the revolution, the role of the proletariat, and the urgency of the moment were laden with mythical and eschatological imagery (Jonsson 2017, 121–123).

A notable difference between the social democratic and the left social democratic reception of the February revolution concerns the significance of the revolution for the political situation in Sweden. For the social democrats, the February Revolution became an argument for the democratization of Sweden. The revolution was, thus, assigned an argumentative significance for the reformist strategy that was lacking in the left social democratic reception. In syndicalist and young socialist press, the revolution was related to hopes of a world social revolution with the aim of stopping the war and establish a socialist society (Jonsson 2017, 123–125).

To conclude, the hope awakened by the Russian Revolution was not only the hope of socialism. In the spring of 1917, the Great War was in its third year of theretofore unprecedented death and destruction. Under such circumstances the prospect of revolution became intimately tied to the longing for world peace. The article ‘Humankind on Its Way to Revolution’, published in the left social democratic paper *Folkets Dagblad Politiken* on 2 May, called for a revolutionary intervention in the course of history in virtually apocalyptic terms:

The whole world is longing and crying out for that strong, divine power, that dictator, who can step forth and bid peace to return, who can compel mankind to lay down their arms and beat their swords into plowshares, who can save mankind and bid the sun to rise on the brilliant morning of a millennial kingdom. (Folkets Dagblad Politiken 1917a)

Here, the proletariat is ascribed a historical role analogous to that of Jesus in the Last Judgement. Since the necessity of revolution is expressed by way of Christian symbolism, the longed-for peace is depicted as a return to an original kingdom of peace rather than as the end of linear time.

The coverage of events in Russia in *Brand*, the weekly newspaper of the young socialists, was also steeped in Christian symbolism relating to the end time, salvation, and awakening. In the article ‘The World Revolution is Nigh’ editor Ivan Oljelund wrote:

A number of socialist sages have predicted, that after the Great War, which has appeared before mankind for decades as an inescapable scourge, the world revolution must arrive and blow open the gates of a new age, ‘the millennial kingdom’. (Oljelund 1917a)

Here, it is rather the world revolution that is depicted as the force capable of turning the tide of history toward its fulfillment in a millennial kingdom, understood both as a beginning and an end.

In these examples, the necessity of world revolution is derived from its position within a historical progression. The eschatological and apocalyptic meaning of this progression is expressed in the myth of eternal return. Drawing on the thinking of Eliade, it is precisely through such representation that the revolution appears real, possible, and even necessary, despite the almost insurmountable obstacles in its path. The use of metaphor is also reminiscent of the revolutionary romanticism that Löwy identifies in the German–Jewish intellectual movement that in the 19th century brought together Jewish messianism, in its restitutionist/utopian interpretation and libertarian utopian thinking (1992, 32).

From the perspective of conceptual history, the above quotes illustrate how easily the modern, linear and progressive concept of revolution reverts to a cyclical conception of history. As Koselleck, among others, have noted, the political concept of revolution was originally an astronomical metaphor. Rather than disappearing, the cyclical connotations have been integrated into the modern concept. Hence, when the necessity of revolution is legitimized through eschatology, eschatology reverts to myth as revolution becomes return. This tendency is in line with Nygaard and Jonsson's observation that when the modern concept of revolution was filled with mythical and messianic associations, the dominant linear conception of time was complicated by the incorporation of a cyclical view of history into the linear narrative that portrayed contemporary events as repetition, learning process, and return to a mythical past.

As time passed and it became increasingly apparent that the February Revolution would bring neither peace nor world revolution, mythical representations of revolution became more frequent, especially in young socialist papers. In a 7 July article in *Brand*, 'The Religion of the Proletariat', revolution was painted in the following manner:

The revolution is a rebirth of human society, a reshaping of everything established, the abolishment of everything antiquated, by the spirit of progress, whose development has come into disharmony with the present state of the world. (Brand 1917a)

This quote shows how a linear conception of time can be expressed in a mythical language of cyclical temporality, illustrating how a myth of eternal return could be subsumed under a linear conception of history based on the idea of progress. Although the revolution is described as 'a rebirth of human society', it is obvious that this rebirth implies neither a return to a paradise of the past nor to prewar society. Revolution is rather seen as a final settlement between present and past and rebirth is understood as the fulfillment of a truly human society, beyond history, and the decadent civilization of capitalism. This human society is in fact socialism, which can only be attained when the revolutionary consciousness of the masses becomes attuned to the 'spirit of progress'.

THE REVOLUTION AS APOCALYPSE

The October Revolution, in which the Bolsheviks seized power, caused consternation as well as enthusiasm among Swedish socialists. It brought deep-seated issues within several socialist organizations to light, concerning the means as well as the aims of their political struggle. In the social democratic press, the revolution was often rejected by not being attributed the legitimacy of the revolution. Instead, it was portrayed as a regrettable perversion that steered Russia away from the democratic hopes raised by the February Revolution. In short, it was being described as illegitimate and unsuccessful because it was not carried out in accordance with a historical materialist view of history (Jonsson 2017, 180).

In the press of the left social democrats on the other hand, the October revolution was portrayed as the savior of the February revolution. In the syndicalist and young socialist press, there was again a great initial uncertainty that met the reader. As in the left social democratic press, the first texts on the development of events in Russia expressed a strong desire that the new revolution was the beginning of the end of the Great War. But already after a few weeks, doubts about the peaceful nature of

the revolution and its truly socialist character began to permeate the texts about the revolution. Although during the period following the revolution, there was always room for a certain fear of and identification with the Bolshevik revolution and politics. The political development in Russia was discarded as a departure from the history of social progress (Jonsson 2017, 180).

The impression that can be drawn from the texts on revolution in the young socialist press, whether expressed in metaphor-filled or more concise texts, is that the importance of the revolutionary struggle was increasingly emphasized as the world revolution was indefinitely deferred. At the same time, the language used to describe it became increasingly cyclical. When a writer in *Brand* attempted to summarize the events of 1917, he evoked apocalyptic imagery, comparing capitalist society to Sodom, depicting the revolution as a return to an Edenic past:

Then, in the great month of March, the lightning rod of revolution clove the black clouds of war and whipped up a thunderous tempest, a harrowing storm that is yet to be stilled, a firestorm that is yet to ravage the earth and burn all that is to be burnt, the clapping thunder of a millennium of subdued wrath, still rolling around the world, Sodom, but also, and this is the astounding greatness of what has been occurring, speaking golden promises that the world will one day rise up out of the raging elements of time, freshly washed in a newfound joy born out of the consciousness of strength. (Brand 1917b)

A few months later, the left socialist Fredrik Ström depicted the turbulent times in a language reminiscent of a Christian sermon. In an article called 'The Throes of Death', he compared the revolution to a holy war and portrayed the battle between socialism and capitalism, between revolution and reaction, as a battle between the Anti-Christ and the Messiah.

If the Russian working class decide again to refuse to bend the knee to violence, determined to fight until the bitter end, declaring the holy war of revolution against capitalism and the German politics of plunder, then it will be a holy war for the revolutionary working class of every nation. Then the flames shall reach higher towards the heavens than ever before. Nobody knows if those flames shall not also, despite everything, sweep over the house of the Germans, reducing all the world of capitalism to ashes and dust. Nobody yet knows if we are seeing the death-throes of capitalism or of revolution. (Ström 1918)

Even if the revolution was to fail it would, similar to the Judgement Day, appear in the future by historical necessity. As the Messiah will ultimately prevail over the Anti-Christ, so the revolution will ultimately overcome reaction.

No, the revolution of the Russian workers shall not perish, even if a world of enemies and traitors would fall upon it, even if it would be the defeated by the forces of capitalism and militarism. It shall live and bear witness to the strength of the proletariat and the ultimate victory of socialism. To the young of the proletariat in every nation it will announce a new day, announce the great social world revolution, which will appear in the very moment, when the thoughts and feelings, the spirit of self-sacrifice and

solidarity, that has enlivened the workers and peasants of Russia, inspires the workers of other nations. (Ström 1918)

For Ström, the cyclical conception of time is to a great degree incorporated into the dominant linear understanding of history. Ultimately, time is imagined as a line. The goal, socialism through world revolution, is placed in a future unlike the present and the past and the road leading there is characterized by the opposite forces of revolution and degeneration. The propagandists of the revolution cannot know when it will arrive but can study the portents, certain that they are living in ultimate, decisive times and certain that it will necessarily arrive. One glimpses the myth of eternal return in Ström's portrayal of the immortality of the October Revolution, bound to return in triumph, its defeat illusory, and contingent in the face of historical necessity.

AWAKENING AND SALVATION

It was a common practice among the social democrats, left social democrats and young socialists of this period to talk of an awakening in reference to the working class organizing itself and its participation in revolutionary activity. Very few doubted that the revolution was necessary in historical-philosophical terms. The study shows that the theme of awakening became more prevalent the more distant any real prospects of revolution seemed. It was used rhetorically as a means of guaranteeing the necessity of a future revolution as well as a means of explaining the bleak prospects of any present revolution.

In Ture Nerman's article, 'Socialism—The Salvation of Humanity', written only a few months after the February Revolution, the myth of eternal return was related to the awakening of the masses in the following manner:

After a thousand days of slaughter, after atrocities and lunacy without match in any time one begins to awake anew, the half-dying peoples coming loose from the grip of patriotic hypnosis, of capital and governments, are already sensing revolution and Last Judgement.

(Nerman 1917)

As in other articles already discussed, Nerman paints an apocalyptic image of the times. The horrors of the Great War are compared with the Last Judgement and history is conceived as linear and eschatological as well as mythic. In describing the war as 'a thousand days of slaughter', it is likened to the thousand-year Kingdom of God that, according to chiliastic eschatology, would precede the Second Coming of Jesus, the thousand years of degeneration that would be the end of the Roman Empire and the moral low point of human history (Ambjörnsson 1984, 60). That the 'half-dying peoples' are awakening anew is here to be understood both as a reawakening from the war and the war-time patriotism of the social democratic parties as well as from the sleep that had rendered the struggles of the working class against capitalism fruitless.

Mythical and eschatological themes were almost wholly absent from the social democrats' reaction to the Russian Revolution. In fact, the world revolution was rarely portrayed in the strong imagery we have seen so far. However, such an absence does not preclude that there were no mythical elements to their conception of revolution. It merely indicates that such elements were manifested in a different manner. For the social democrats, it was the social revolution that was occasionally described

in mythic terms. One could easily find any number of different definitions of social revolution in the social democratic press, but it was generally understood in terms of political reform and the need to educate, enlighten, and awaken the working class. For example, Ernst J. Lundqvist wrote in a [1918](#) article published in the social democratic magazine *Tiden*, ‘The Importance of Popular Education in Our Struggles to Reshape Society’:

Spiritual development is precisely what we need now more than ever, that can and will save the world and mankind from that night of danger and degradation into which we have fallen, out of that dangerous, reeking dead-end alley into which the progress of society has strayed. ([Lundqvist 1918](#))

In this article, cyclical time is expressed quite differently than in the previously discussed quotes. Principally, we see an eschatological conception of the importance of popular education. The cyclic moment is found in the metaphor of the dead-end alley, into which society has strayed as evidenced both by the war and events in Russia following the October Revolution. The conception of history conveyed here could, thus, rather be expressed in terms of the uneducated working class being bound to repeat, while their education and enlightenment sets history back on its linear, progressive course. The cyclical elements are thus attributed negative quality.

The difference between the function of cyclical time in social democratic, young socialist and left social democratic press can be understood from Löwy’s description of revolutionary romanticism. While both the young socialists’ and left social democrat’s concept of revolution is clearly inspired by this movement, it does not seem to have influenced social democratic thinking to the same extent. For young socialists and left social democrats, albeit in different respects, repetition and cyclical temporality are associated with the revolutionary spark or image of the past, theorized by Benjamin. From the perspective of Benjamin and, according to Löwy, the romantic revolutionary movement, there is a revolutionary potential in every historical defeat that can be utilized and drawn upon in the political struggle for a socialist future ([Benjamin 1955](#); [Löwy 1992, 25, 33](#)).

REVOLUTION BY NECESSITY OF NATURE

This section explores how the metaphors of nature that surrounded the concept of revolution can be understood in terms of myth and eschatology, linear, and cyclical time.

Metaphors of nature and science were commonly used at this time to describe the necessity of revolution. Such rhetoric testifies to the high societal status of science in general and more specifically to the profound effect of Darwinism on political language and thought. By transferring arguments from biology into the political domain, one could hope to obtain the same degree of prestige for ones’ own position by presenting it as scientific. Such metaphors often tacitly represented the political domain as governed by laws in the same manner as nature. For instance, German social democrat Karl Kautsky had argued that the war would be the midwife of the revolution, thereby implying that the relation between the present and the future revolution was as law bound and natural as that between pregnancy and birth (1909).

Paetau offers several explanations for the high degree of natural and Judeo-Christian metaphors in the language of 19th Century German social democracy ([1990, 448](#)). First,

he argues that metaphors have a heuristic, explanatory power and can provide a clear illustration of relationships that are in fact complex and perhaps even contradictory. As such, they are evocative and can seduce or otherwise engage people emotionally, which is increasingly important as society changes toward greater ideologization, politicization, and democratization, in Koselleck's words. Paetau's interpretation is in line with Freeden and Steinmetz's observation that the study of political concepts can also reveal the emotive dimensions of political rhetoric. Like Paetau, I would argue that these emotive dimensions are particularly prominent in metaphor-filled political language.

Paetau notes that nature metaphors had a prominent place in the social democratic conceptual world of the 19th Century. References to the changing of the seasons and the different parts of the day, to light and darkness and other similar natural phenomena meant that the German Social Democrats used a language that had been elaborated and developed during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and made it their own (1990, 448).

For instance, spring was associated with the progress of socialism, when, similar to nature in spring, free men would have the opportunity to flourish. Spring was also used to express the analogy between nature and history, which meant that the laws which, following Darwin, were perceived to govern nature were now transferred to say something about man as a historical being. Eley has observed that one of the prominent features of the Second International was that it dressed socialism in a scientific costume. The encounter with the theory of evolution had been intellectually liberating for Kautsky's generation of socialists whose view of society was permeated by a scientific perspective shaped by readings of Darwin, Büchner, and Haeckel (Eley 2002, 45).

Paetau sees the rhetoric as an expression of a politically passive position. One question to consider in this article is whether metaphors of nature were only used to signal a passive political position in Swedish socialist press or whether they could also be used in situations characterized by political activity or to enthuse for political activity in the immediate present.

In the following, I will discuss some instances in which Swedish socialists used mythic imagery of nature to describe revolution as necessary and unavoidable. Metaphors of nature were used in a manner reminiscent of the way in which myths explain reality. When the cyclical character of nature was used to describe politics, it reintroduced cyclical conceptions of time and mythical notions of eternal return into the understanding of history.

The coverage of the Russian Revolution in young socialist newspaper *Brand* was often heavily metaphor laden. In a November 1920 article 'What History Teaches', Ivar Lundberg writes, after almost four years of foundering hopes of world revolution, that: 'In everything living, in all of history lives and breathes an eternal repetition. Development is established, but if it is always progressive is far from certain' (Lundberg 1920). In Lundberg's argument, politics and nature are thought of as obeying the same laws. Just as nature is cyclical so is history, wherein victory is followed by defeat, but seen from a higher vantage point. Again, just as in nature, mankind is evolving.

Lundberg's article can be read as an affirmation of the possibility of world revolution, even in the face of its apparent defeat. The myth of eternal return takes on a naturalistic meaning, guaranteeing progress by promising the return of revolution.

Similarly, in these cyclic nature metaphors we can trace the romantic revolutionary thinking that Löwy discusses, in which restoration and utopia are brought together.

In the final paragraphs, Lundberg argues that the individual must be revolutionized before society can be. As previously seen, this argument was often used to claim the inevitability of revolution even when any real prospect of it seemed distant. According to such an argument, the revolution would be victorious when the proletariat is awakened from its slumber. In the social-democrat Lundqvist's argument, it was popular education that would awaken the masses, for the young socialist Lundberg it is rather the activism of the revolutionary. Furthermore, Lundqvist's and Lundberg's arguments are different in that repetition is a mere negative state for Lundqvist, while for Lundberg, it is repetition itself that will bring back revolution and put history back on its progressive course.

Lundberg's comparison of nature and politics or rather his subordination of politics to nature is not the only example of metaphors of nature and the theory of evolution being used to explain the postponement of revolution while maintaining its necessity and legitimacy. It was especially common in *Brand's* discussions of revolution and history. Persson and Lund have claimed that the concept of revolution and, in particular, the social revolution had a central role in how the young socialists and the syndicalists understood their own struggles in a changing context. They argue that Swedish syndicalists' concept of revolution changed markedly after the Russian Revolution. Having previously denoted a sudden change, it now came to mean a more gradual change. This change was specifically evident in the Declaration of Principles of 1922 (Lund 2001; Persson 1993).

Examining *Brand's* news coverage and editorials on revolution, it becomes apparent that revolution had taken on an evolutionary meaning long before 1922. While true that the Russian Revolution was paradigmatic for the understanding of revolution, particularly in the sense that it meant a disengagement from a stage-based historical materialism, revolution and evolution were already used as synonyms during 1917 and even earlier (Lund 2001; Persson 1993).

In the fall of 1916, four months before the outbreak of the Great War, Ivar Oljelund depicted the times in the article 'Progress or Regression' as rushing toward the abyss. Progress and culture were described as dependent on the morality of individuals and on their capability of passing on values to the next generation, since it was through the individual's understanding of society that change was possible. Despite this, Lundberg was not willing to wholly exclude evolution. He rhetorically asked if the theory of evolution was a freak of nature, 'Is there no evolution in the spiritual realm?' (Oljelund 1916). In a 3 March 1917 article, hence, only a few days before the February Revolution, Oljelund provided an answer to the question of how the young socialists saw the theory of evolution. In an editorial by the name 'Evolution and Politics', the two concepts were juxtaposed, with politics being represented as the negative concept. Evolution and progress were contrasted not only to politics but also to capitalism and the struggle for survival (Oljelund 1917b). Here the concept of revolution has become social to such a degree that evolution can be used as its synonym, while politics becomes its antonym. In the process, the concept of evolution has become socialized and denaturalized in the same degree and can be opposed to the social Darwinist concept of 'struggle for survival', which in turn can be understood as a naturalization of the social.

Besides using the cyclical character of nature as metaphor for the conditions of revolution, it was also common among socialists of every kind to use metaphors of nature to describe revolution as an unstoppable force. *Brand* wrote: 'The breakup of the river ice has started. Spring is approaching, the spring of the soul and of society, for the red rooster crows in the great land to the East' (*Brand 1917c*), 'the seething powers of revolution are fermenting among the masses', and 'the spring of peoples is revolution. Then sprout all the seeds of rebellion and dissatisfaction, which have been sown in the cold season of capitalism' (*Brand 1917c*). On 19 May 1917 Oljelund, under the headline 'The World Revolution is Approaching', wrote: 'Great things are about to occur. When the billows reach our shores, we too are forced to progress' (*Oljelund 1917a*).

Oljelund's comparison of the world revolution to the unstoppable force of waves raging toward shore is, just as the other examples above, a way of expressing the inevitability of revolution. Thus, metaphors of nature were used to portray world revolution as the natural consequence of the Russian Revolution. Once again, the concept of revolution is almost depoliticized in young socialist press.

Such metaphors were common in the social democratic press as well. In *Arbetet*, a great deal of enthusiasm over the February Revolution was evident. As we have seen in *Brand* and elsewhere, the February Revolution, almost as soon as it occurred, was given a wider meaning, making it a sign of an impending world revolution. A similar phenomenon can be noticed here, where the February Revolution was associated with expectations of further revolutionary progress, although the social democrats rather expected the social revolution. An enraptured writer proclaimed: 'But the revolution is a mighty, unstoppable river and what is a fire engine against a Niagara?' (*Arbetet 1917*).

In the left social democratic newspaper *Folkets Dagblad Politiken*, the February Revolution and the hopes it inspired was described in the following manner:

The Russian Revolution is less than three weeks old and already it has rocked the world. It has shaken all the Earth and under its East wind thrones and vaults are shivering. The Russian Revolution is the great turning point, the spark of a new morning after the night of the Great War. The national war at the fronts has run its course. The new international war is already rumbling around us. Release the storm! It shall clear out the of corpses. Our feet are kicking with impatience. (*Folkets Dagblad Politiken 1917b*)

Here, we again find an apocalyptic image of the times. The revolution is given mythical as well eschatological traits and a dramaturgy reinforced by metaphors of natural force. The revolution is a turning point, the spark of a new morning, it rumbles menacingly at reaction and is a storm inexorably sweeping away the past. In a similar vein, one could write that there was 'a revolutionary atmospheric pressure' during the autumn of 1917 and that 'the revolutionary wave has swollen to such a size and force, that it won't be easily stopped' (*Folkets Dagblad Politiken 1917c; 1917d*).

Paetau argues that early German social democracy's use of metaphors signaled a politically passive position based on a deterministic view of history. This perspective is undoubtedly also found in the Swedish socialists' use of metaphors. Nevertheless, the

study has shown that the Swedish socialists also referred to nature in various ways to arouse enthusiasm for revolutionary struggle in the present or to describe the present as explosive and revolutionary. Words such as 'ferment' and 'mature' were used both in the politically passive sense that Paetau discusses and to evoke an image of the present as revolutionary and explosive.

THE NECESSITY OF REVOLUTION AND THE CYCLE OF NATURE

We can conclude that Swedish socialists turned to the language of nature to describe the conditions of (political) revolution. It is not possible within the confines of this article to precisely map the displacements of metaphors occurring at this time. It is still worth noting that such a displacement did occur and in a similar fashion to that which was discussed in the section concerning how the myth of eternal return was used in conjunction with an eschatological conception of time in representations of the temporality of revolution.

In the summer of 1919, more than two years had passed since the February Revolution, and the nations of Europe and the world had witnessed several attempts at revolution, which had inspired Swedish socialists in general and the left social democrats in particular. However, it was now apparent that world revolution was not imminent. In left social democratic press writers often used metaphors of nature to emphasize the inevitability of revolution and how revolution progressed by means of alternating victories and defeats. In an editorial called 'The Achievements of revolutionary Socialism' by a writer using the pen name Internationalist, the hope of revolution was placed upon the revolutionary struggles of the non-European peoples.

That communism is gaining ground in the world for every passing day, no bourgeois paper can any longer deny, as hard as they may try.... And communism is now in a more advantageous position than ever. The tables have turned backed and forth, as if carried by a wave the hopes of communism have risen high one day, but as the wave breaks it has often plunged back down the next. But in its unconquerable strength the current of revolution only rises further against that wave breaker, higher and steeper after each defeat. (*Politiken* 1919)

Both this and previously analyzed quotes show that a cyclical perception of time merged with the linear one and both complemented, reinforced, and problematized it. The cyclical conception of repetition formed a central part of the argumentation that the revolution must come, in the future. The function of the cyclical element thus seems to have been not only to intensify determinism but also to make room for the revolution as activism or voluntarism. Defeat was, thus, incorporated into a larger narrative, in which defeat was not an anomaly but a natural part of the revolutionary narrative of the history of social progress (Jonsson 2017).

The argument can also be understood in terms of the revolutionary image of the past that Benjamin theorizes. From the perspective of Benjamin and, according to Löwy, the romantic revolutionary movement, there is a revolutionary flicker in every historical defeat that can be utilized and drawn upon in the political struggle for a socialist future.

The reactions of Swedish socialists to the Russian Revolution and the concept of revolution formulated in response to these paradigmatic events were imbued with a teleology of necessity. Neither the February nor the October Revolution were seen as meaningful events in themselves but were instead defined in relation to notions of the world revolution, the social revolution, the history of social progress, and the relation between the present, the past, and the future.

Eliade understands the myth of eternal return as a way of giving meaning to singular events, as a manner in which archaic man resists history. He also shows how this myth has survived into modernity in conjunction with an eschatological understanding of history. One question that has been central to my analysis is how this is expressed in enlightened societies characterized by notions of history as progressive. How is the singular event understood under such conditions? Based on this analysis, an answer to that question would be that the philosophy of history expressed in the writings of Swedish socialists also amounts to a kind of resistance against history not unlike the one-sidedly mythic understanding of history. This is achieved by reintroducing a kind of myth of eternal return into a teleological and eschatological conception of history.

While the young socialist and left social democratic concept of revolution was to a large extent influenced by a romantic revolutionary current of ideas, implying that cyclical temporality was a guarantee that the revolution would almost necessarily come in the future, cyclical time often took on a negative quality in the social democratic press.

Paetau has argued that early German social democracy's use of metaphors signaled a politically passive position based on a deterministic view of history. The study has shown that the Swedish socialists use of nature metaphors was more ambivalent. They referred to nature in various ways in order to arouse enthusiasm for revolutionary struggle in the present or to describe the present as explosive and revolutionary. Words such as 'ferment' and 'mature' were used both in the politically passive sense that Paetau discusses and to evoke an image of the present as revolutionary and explosive.

To what extent does this analysis shed light on the ideological differences among the different parties and factions of the Swedish labour movement at the time? The answer would be that the concepts of political and social revolution had essentially become indistinguishable among left social democrats and young socialists, while social democrats on the other hand still separated them. While they all viewed the February Revolution as a first step toward world revolution, the social democrats saw it as a strictly political revolution, unlike the others who barely considered it a revolution at all, but rather as a sign of a coming world revolution.

These differences are also illustrated by differences in the understanding of the concepts of evolution and social revolution. For instance, writers in *Brand* used evolution more or less as a synonym of revolution while rejecting the concept of politics itself. The social democratic press on the other hand hardly ever used the concept of evolution in a political context. After the October Revolution, social democratic writers rarely expressed any enthusiasm over political revolutions or considered them necessary steps toward a world revolution. However, they continued to use the concept of social revolution, thereby maintaining their claim as rightful heirs to the revolutionary heritage of the labor movement, but the concept had now essentially come to mean the achievement of a socialist society through reform.

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