

Reflections on trans-national comparative history from an Anglo-Swedish perspective

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Introduction

Interest in trans-national history, which we understand as the desire to transcend national paradigms, seems to have grown in recent years.¹ In part this stems from the recognition of the role of history in the process of nation-building in western Europe at least.² Challenges to the nation state at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the form of trans-national phenomena such as mass migration and economic globalisation, have sparked historians' interest in historical subjects that do not fit neatly into national boundaries. While it may yet be too soon to suggest that the nation state has lost its position as the taken for granted unit of historical analysis in the modern era, for example as far as school and university syllabi are concerned, among academic historians at least there now seems to be a pervasive and growing scepticism about national history.³

The interest in trans-national history does not seem to have been matched with a noticeable enthusiasm for cross-national comparative history, and it is probably still fair to say that comparative history remains 'a theory without much practice.'⁴ Comparative history is not necessarily the same as trans-national history of course.⁵ Indeed, in some cases cross-national comparative history may help to reinforce the national versions of history rather than to undermine them. For this reason, some historians have questioned the value of comparative history. Arguing that comparative history moreover treats its cases as autonomous and ignores the links

¹ Patricia Clavin, "Defining Transnationalism", *Contemporary European History*, 14: 4, 2005, pp. 421-439: 434.

² Stefan Berger with Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, "Apologias for the Nation- State in Western Europe since 1800", in Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800*, London, 1999, pp. 3-14: 3; Mary Fulbrook, "Introduction: States, Nations and the Development of Europe", in Mary Fulbrook, ed., *National Histories and European History*, London, 1993, pp. 1-17: 8; Patrik Hall, *Den svenskaste historien. Nationalism i Sverige under sex sekler*, Stockholm, 2000.

³ Deborah Cohen and Maura O'Connor, "Comparative History, Cross-National History, Transnational History – Definitions", in Cohen and O'Connor, eds., *Comparison and History: Europe in Cross-National Perspective*, New York and Abingdon, 2004, pp. ix-xxiv: ix; Fulbrook, 'Introduction', p. 9.

⁴ Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931*, Oxford, 1994, p. 1.

between them, they have turned instead to the history of cultural transfer to explore the hybridity and trans-national nature of historical phenomena.⁶ Proponents of the study of mutual influences and national ‘crossings’ have gone so far as to suggest that comparative history is “a relic of structural history, incompatible with the new questions raised by cultural historians and post-structuralist analysis.”⁷ Paradoxically, this is a reversal of the historical sociologists’ critique during the 1980s that comparative history was too descriptive, too catholic in its methodology and lacking in the necessary rigour for generating causal explanation.⁸ There are clear benefits to be derived from explicit discussion of these challenges. In contrast to the recent emphasis upon the limitations of the comparison in cross-national studies, we seek to demonstrate that comparative history is not necessarily incompatible with the broader aims of a trans-national approach.⁹

This article, which draws upon the findings of three local Anglo-Swedish comparisons, has two underlying aims. Firstly, we address the question of an existing Anglo-Swedish historiography and relate it to our local case studies. We bring the findings of our own studies to bear upon this historiography, and reflect upon the question of whether the Anglo-Swedish comparison shores up the current scepticism about the comparative approach, or, alternatively, if it may offer opportunities for fruitful cross-national studies. During the modern era, at least, there appear to be some marked contrasts between these two states: one was the first industrial nation and a major imperial power while the other, having declined from a position of regional dominance in the seventeenth century, was still in the late nineteenth century a poverty-stricken and sparsely-populated nation on the periphery of Europe. But there are also some important similarities. Both countries experienced a Reformation that was more complete than in many other parts of Europe (though more so in Sweden than in Britain), and both demonstrated a remarkable continuity in their integrity as

⁵ Michael Miller, “Comparative and Cross-National History: Approaches, Differences, Problems”, in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, pp. 115-132: 115.

⁶ Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, *Transferts. Les relations interculturelles dans l’espace franco-allemand*, Paris, 1998. See also Stefan Berger, “Comparative History”, in Stefan Berger, Heiko Feldner and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing History: Theory and Practice*, London, 2003, pp. 161-179.

⁷ Deborah Cohen, “Comparative History: Buyer Beware”, in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, pp. 57-69.

⁸ Theda Skocpol, ed., *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology*, Cambridge, 1984.

⁹ See, for example, Miller, “Comparative and Cross-National History”, p. 126; Heinz-Gerhard Haupt and Jürgen Kocka, “Comparative History: Methods, Aims, Problems”, in Cohen and O’Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, pp. 23-39: 30, all of whom argue that comparison is indeed compatible with trans-national or cross-national history.

territorial states stretching back to the sixteenth century. In the twentieth century finally, both could be said to have gained a reputation as innovators in social policy.¹⁰ During the twentieth century Sweden gained a reputation as a model society that inspired policymakers in Britain and elsewhere, but the traffic has not been all one way, especially during the early industrial era.¹¹ The examples presented here endeavour to show that Britain and Sweden are no more nor less comparable than any other two states, particularly if the unit of analysis is local.

Secondly, building upon this discussion of the Anglo-Swedish research field we move to consider the broader question of the validity of the comparative historical approach. Here we review our research findings and consider our collective conclusions in the light of the classical and contemporary criticism of comparativists. Is there a way that comparativists may proceed whilst avoiding the difficulties of reinforcing national narratives? If so, can these reflections be extended beyond the parameters of our local Anglo-Swedish comparisons, to address a broader comparative compass? Whilst we return to these questions in the concluding section of this article, we begin here with an outline of the three comparative studies that form the basis of this discussion.

Case study 1: the rise of labour in Britain and Sweden c. 1890-1920

We begin with a comparative analysis of social change, democratisation and the development of modern party politics in Britain and Sweden before the First World War.¹² At first glance, this comparison seems to suggest a story of contrasts rather than similarities. The background to the study of labour history in Britain and Sweden could hardly be more different. Whereas the Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party could claim to be one of the most successful in western Europe, the history of working-class politics in Britain has often been subtly affected by notions of ‘absence’ or ‘failure’ against a background of Conservative hegemony. The British labour movement was exceptional in its lack of programmatic commitment to socialism, its diffuse and decentred organisation, and the inability to overcome

¹⁰ Hugh Hecllo, *Modern Social Politics in Britain and Sweden: From Relief to Income Maintenance*, New Haven, 1974, p. 15.

¹¹ See Patrick Salmon and Tony Barrow, eds., *Britain and the Baltic: Studies in Commercial, Political and Cultural Relations 1500-2000*, Sunderland, 2003; Hanna Hodacs, *Converging World Views: The European Expansion and Early Nineteenth Century Anglo-Swedish Contacts*, Uppsala, 2003.

¹² Mary Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective: Britain and Sweden c.1890-1920*, Lund, 2006.

sectarian divisions within the working class. This stood in contrast to a Swedish labour movement which, until 1918 at least, was closely modelled on German social democracy: centralised, tightly organised and ideologically coherent.¹³

For most of the nineteenth century both Britain and Sweden had witnessed a transfer of power from the centre to the municipalities, as local governments responded pragmatically to new urban problems like sanitation, water supply, transport and planning. By the early twentieth century there were signs that this process had reversed to some extent. But it was by no means a simple picture. The demarcation of responsibilities was only resolved through a long and complex process of negotiation – and sometimes conflict – between the central state and the municipalities.¹⁴ The local/national relationship in regard to political activity was similarly complex and ambiguous. Political parties developed increasingly extensive organisations and sophisticated means for influencing and controlling the constituencies, but it was not always possible for them to enforce these. As the British historian Duncan Tanner has shown, although there were forces encouraging the nationalisation of politics before 1914, ‘voters in varying areas still had very different interests, expectations and attitudes.’¹⁵ The orthodoxy of the ‘triumph of party’ and the imposition of a national political agenda on local politics in the early twentieth century thus needs to be qualified. Localism continued to carry an appeal for all groups of voters and their involvement in local conflicts helped parties to consolidate electoral support at the local level.¹⁶

This point can be illustrated through a brief comparison of two naval towns: Plymouth in south west England and Karlskrona in southern Sweden. Naval dockyard towns were unusual in the extent to which their development was governed by political and strategic decisions taken by the state according to the needs of

¹³ Egon Wertheimer, *Portrait of the British Labour Party*, London, 1929, pp. xii-xiii; Ross McKibbin, *The Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924*, (Oxford, 1974; Ross McKibbin, “Why Was There No Marxism in Great Britain?” in McKibbin, *The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950*, Oxford, 1990; first published 1984, pp. 1-41.

¹⁴ Christine Bellamy, *Administering Central-Local Relations, 1871-1919: The Local Government Board in Its Fiscal and Cultural Context*, Manchester, 1988; Rune Bokholm, *Städernas handlingsfrihet. En studie av expansionskedet 1900-1930*, Lund, 1995.

¹⁵ Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918*, Cambridge, 1990, p. 80.

¹⁶ Jon Lawrence, *Speaking for the People: Party, Language and Popular Politics in England, 1867-1914*, Cambridge, 1998. On the development of national organisation in the Swedish labour movement see Lotta Gröning, *Vägen till makten. SAP:s organisation och dess betydelse för den politiska verksamheten 1900-1933*, Uppsala, 1988; Göran Salmonsson, *Den förståndiga viljan. Svenska Järn- och metallarbetareförbundet 1888-1902*, Uppsala, 1998.

security policy.¹⁷ In both Plymouth and Karlskrona the movement for independent labour representation emerged around the turn of the twentieth century as part of a broader challenge by liberals and progressives to established elites and interests in municipal politics. Labour's attempts to incorporate these local campaigns into its national strategy were markedly unsuccessful in Plymouth. The party tried to control the candidatures at two parliamentary by-elections¹⁸ in 1902 and 1904, but its attempts failed, and Labour made no further attempt to intervene in Plymouth before 1918. In Karlskrona, the incorporation of the local labour movement into the national party occurred more smoothly, especially following the decision to establish regional party districts in 1905. But there was also the potential for tension. As elsewhere in Sweden, the social democratic youth club was a source of some friction, and its radical challenges could be seen partly as an assertion of independence against the growing mechanisms of control from the party leadership.¹⁹

Although there were clearly some important differences between the two cases, not least the relative success of labour in Karlskrona compared to Plymouth, there were also important similarities. Above all, it was the dynamic relationship between local and national politics, between the national state and local interests, that was one of the most important features of late nineteenth and early twentieth century politics in both Plymouth and Karlskrona. The period saw the partial consolidation of a national political culture, dominated by national institutions such as parliament, political parties and the national press. For all organisations, including trade unions, the challenge was to respond and adapt to local experience, which was partly rooted in local material conditions, and transform it into political support. But this was not a one way process, nor was it necessarily a complete one. Local activists responded pragmatically to attempts to impose central control, or sometimes they challenged them. The national state could be appealed to as a neutral dispenser of justice freed from local vested interests, or it could be criticised as inflexible and unresponsive to local needs and interests.

¹⁷ Mary Hilson, "Labour Politics in a Naval Dockyard: The Case of Karlskrona, Sweden c.1880-1925", *International Review of Social History*, 46, 2001, pp. 341-369.

¹⁸ I.e. *fyllnadsval*.

¹⁹ Karlskrona Arbetarekommun styrelsen minutes, 21st December 1905; Karlskrona Arbetarekommun minutes, 4th January 1906, 27th November 1906, Folkrörelsearkivet i Blekinge län; *Blekinge Folkblad* 5th January 1906, 30th November 1906, Kungliga Biblioteket.

Case Study 2: The Co-operative Movement in Britain and Sweden

The dynamic relationship between national and local developments is also a theme of Katarina Friberg's study of the consumer co-operative movement in Britain and Sweden 1860-1970.²⁰ From an international perspective, the British and Swedish consumer co-operative movements belong to the 'successful' group of co-operatives in terms of business size, relative market shares, and membership figures. Patterns of expansion appear roughly parallel in both countries, as do the difficulties co-operation faced after 1945 in keeping up with competition. However, the impression of similarity hinges to no small degree on the choice of vantage point. Described in general terms the British and Swedish co-operative movements do indeed appear to be similar. But there are also crucial differences – in terms of the timing and pace of change, its underlying causes, and the strategies adopted for dealing with the situation after 1945 – which come to the fore if Britain is compared exclusively to Sweden. Whereas British co-operatives were grappling with changing patterns of consumption immediately after the war, the challenge for the Swedish co-operatives was to accommodate the consequences of the late urbanisation wave of the 1960s. The structure of competition in the retail sector was changing in both countries, but at different times and for different reasons. Most importantly, the strategies for coping with these changes differed. The Swedish Co-operative Union pumped more resources into research and education, and future-orientated leaders managed to initiate a rationalisation process earlier than their British colleagues. In fact, Swedish co-operatives took a leading role in the rationalisation process of the 1960s: the remedy antedates the affliction.

These national-level characteristics of British and Swedish consumer co-operation form the background to the study of two local consumer co-operatives, the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Co-operative Society in North East England and Solidar in South West Sweden. The question is: how should these differences be accounted for? Scholars have mainly focused on external factors such as changes in patterns of consumption and increasing competition to explain patterns of co-operative development in different countries after 1945.²¹ Internal organisational factors were

²⁰ Katarina Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation: A Comparative Study of Consumer Co-operative Organisation in Britain and Sweden 1860 to 1970*, Växjö, 2005.

²¹ M. T. Hornsby, "Co-operation in Crisis: Challenges and Response in the Co-operative Retail Movement in England from the Late Nineteenth Century to the Mid Twentieth Century", unpublished MPhil thesis, University of York, 1989. Hugo Kylebäck, *Konsumentkooperation i strukturomvandling*.

however equally important in explaining pre-emptive rationalisation in Sweden and the absence of such measures in Britain. Differential outcomes in business terms may be related to internal practices and procedures for decision making, especially the power balance between employed managers, elected representatives on boards, and the membership. The close study of minutes from member meetings over a century revealed the workings of co-operation which in turn can give us clues as to the different strategies of the British and Swedish consumer co-operative movement. The study showed that mechanisms for the raising and distribution of co-operative capital were vital for the development of co-operation.

In the Newcastle Society, the quarterly member meeting was endowed with far-reaching authority to decide on the distribution of the surplus. These powers were gradually limited as important decisions – on employees' salaries for example – were deferred to the board and management, but member meetings remained a conflict arena, where different interests were pitted against each other, generating in turn strategies for the mobilisation of members. This political culture had, in turn, consequences for the finances and governance of the society. When interested parties competed for resources, those resources were not likely to be tucked away for long-term strategic purposes. The member meeting could thus also undermine financial stability by increasing the reliance on withdrawable capital. The district member meetings of Solidar were quite different. Most decisions at the meeting were confirmations of the board's suggestions, and the range of issues to be decided directly was narrowly circumscribed. Meetings remained important, but as part of an elaborate system of communication and education rather than as a conflict arena.

The explanation for these differences in the conduct of meetings lies partly in the local rules and standing orders of the two societies, which shaped their political cultures. Solidar's rules contained clauses specifying that pre-determined proportions of the surplus should be devoted to particular ends, among them reserves and education. From 1910, fifteen percent of the surplus went immediately to the reserve fund. The rules of the Newcastle Society contained no such clauses: on the contrary, their rules explicitly gave the member meeting authority to decide over these issues. These differences between the rules of the two societies are not merely the results of

Del 1-3, Kungälv, 1983-1989, Göteborg, 1999; Ellen Furlough and Carl Strikwerda, eds., Consumers against Capitalism? Consumer Cooperation in Europe, North America, and Japan, 1840-1990, Lanham, 1999.

local idiosyncrasies, however. They have roots in the legal and institutional histories of Sweden and Britain. Before the 1895 Association Act, there was no tailor-made legislation for co-operative societies in Sweden. Societies wishing to enjoy legal protection had to register instead under the Joint Stock Company Act of 1848. The practice of putting aside a proportion of the surplus in a reserve fund stems from the co-operatives founded under this act.²² As those societies developed, this view of the reserve fund was institutionalised and built into their practices. So when the Co-operative Union (KF) was formed in 1899, representatives of the founding assembly came from societies where this institute was accepted as self-evident. This had consequences further down the road. In 1908, KF issued a set of ‘model rules’, including the stipulation that 15 per cent of a society’s surplus should go to the reserve fund. Two years later, KF membership was made conditional upon acceptance of these model rules.²³

This somewhat tangled story helps explain what turns out to be a consequential formulation in Solidar’s statutes. Insofar as Swedish co-operative societies aspired to join KF, and the vast majority of them did, they had to make the same provisions in their rules. When Solidar joined KF, it had no choice but to accept the model rules, which in turn implied that the reserve fund grew and the member meeting handed over power to decide over it to the board and management. In contrast, British co-operatives were never forced to operate under a legal regime requiring them to set aside a proportion of the surplus in a reserve fund. Nor was this an entrance requirement to either the Co-operative Union or the wholesale societies. If, in particular societies, the authority of the member meeting was reduced, this was the outcome of decisions within the organisation itself, and of gradual shifts in the balance of power between employed managers, elected representatives on boards, and the membership.

If this was the case, then British co-operative societies should resemble the Newcastle Society, if not in detail then at least in terms of overall patterns of development. Whether or not this is the case will have to be determined by further research. What we can say is that the contrasting comparison of cross-national local cases invites new interpretive backgrounds for the analysis of national-level

²² Tore Johansson, “Samhällets spelregler i förändring – kooperativ lagstiftning”, in Peder Aléx, Jan Ottoson, Berith Wikström, eds., *Mellan stat & marknad – ett sekel av Kooperation*, Kooperativ Årsbok 1999, p. 10.

developments. In order to explain peculiarities of the local case, it is necessary to invoke national-level developments, albeit of a different kind than those ordinarily included in the national history of co-operation. Conversely, the historical argument makes it plausible to assume that many of the mechanisms identified in the local case apply to a much larger set of Swedish co-operatives within KF. In this sense, the comparison of local cases contributes to our understanding of developments on a national scale.

Case Study 3: post-industrial society in Britain and Sweden

The local/national dynamic is also apparent in Natasha Vall's comparison of the impact of post-industrialism on Malmö and Newcastle after 1945.²⁴ By 1945 both cities were distinguished as centres for the large scale industrial production of both ships and armaments, but by the 1970s, both were widely regarded as experiencing late industrial decline. Both cities were rendered vulnerable to the impact of internationalisation by the pattern of economic growth that they shared, characterised by large units of production, and a relative absence of either high-tech industries or of smaller entrepreneurial activity. But the respective management of industrial decline demonstrated that a local government could compensate for the combined effects of internationalisation and the volatility of financial markets.²⁵ The comparison of the labour force in transition to post-industrial society both challenged and reinforced aspects of national typologies. Undeniably, the characterisation of Sweden as a model for Keynesian management was reinforced in comparison with Newcastle.²⁶

Whilst the characterisation of Anglo-Swedish economic 'difference' underpinned the local comparison of deindustrialisation, perceptions of Anglo-Swedish 'similarity' helped to orientate the local comparison of other questions such as housing. During the 1960s national similarities in plans for a mixed economy, full employment and the development of social housing are striking: in Britain this phase

²³ Olof Ruin, *Kooperativa Förbundet 1899-1929: En organisationsstudie*, Lund, 1960, pp. 37-39.

²⁴ Natasha Vall, *Cities in Decline? A Comparative History of Malmö and Newcastle after 1945*, Malmö, 2007.

²⁵ Paul Hirst and Graham Thompson, *Globalisation in Question: The International Economy and the Possibilities*, Cambridge, 1999, p. 146

²⁶ James Fulcher, *Labour Movements Employers and the State, Conflict and Co-operation in Britain and Sweden*, Oxford, 1991; Gøsta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Cambridge, 1990.

of ‘consensus politics’ was also known as ‘the Swedish way’.²⁷ As executed by both national and local agencies these years brought dramatic changes to the daily lives of each city’s inhabitants. In particular, modernisation of the social housing stock in Malmö and Newcastle radically altered both the physical and social landscape of the cities after 1945.

In exploring this similarity it further transpired that a cross-over of ideas about the planning and building of new communities was evolving *between* the cities. In Newcastle, the Labour council turned to Scandinavia for inspiration in its aim to reinvigorate the city’s old industrial housing stock. A series of reports commissioned by the Housing Committee concluded that housing developments undertaken in Denmark and Sweden were more suitable for Newcastle’s requirements than those in central Europe. Subsequently, the Newcastle Housing Committee proposed a visit to Stockholm, Gothenburg, Copenhagen and Malmö, the latter including a visit to Skånska Cement Gjuteriet where the British visitors were invited to observe the construction of prefabricated housing units.²⁸ These building methods so impressed the British councillors that negotiations were initiated for the purchase and implementation of this scheme for re-housing in North East England. In the light of the ambitions for the comprehensive refurbishment of the urban landscape in Newcastle we could see this request as an expression of wider admiration for what the councillors had witnessed during their visit to the Swedish city. For what was Malmö in 1963, if not modern? The seamless adaptation to the motorized city had been achieved decades earlier, and Newcastle councillors must have looked on with envy as cars coursed through the centre of the city on wide streets lined with elegant functionalist buildings.²⁹

In the event, the transfer of ideas about building methods and modernising the urban landscape was never comprehensive, in part because a dramatic turn of events in local politics in Newcastle militated against the kind of continuity which would have been necessary to execute ideas appropriated from abroad. That said, this instance of crossover allowed the comparison to raise some interesting counter-factual questions. For instance, how would Newcastle’s post-war housing responses have

²⁷ Francois Bedarida, *A Social History of England 1851-1975*, London, 1979, p. 198; Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had it So Good. A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles*, London, 2005.

²⁸ Newcastle Housing Committee Minute Book, Volume 14, 14 May 1963, Point 16, MD/NC/106, Newcastle City Council.

²⁹ Friberg, *The Workings of Co-operation*, p. 101.

developed without the pronounced legacy of Victorian overcrowding? Would greater political decentralisation have made a difference to the execution of social housing in Newcastle? Equally, did greater political decentralisation make a difference to the execution of social housing in Malmö?

Unlike Newcastle, in Malmö social housing had never been associated exclusively with municipal ownership, and in the British city the implementation of social housing was complicated further by a severe land shortage. This meant that all new houses built following slum clearance had to use existing sites.³⁰ Despite such historic and important differences, the comparison indicates important similarities in the *ambitions* and *expectations* for re-housing the citizens of Malmö and Newcastle amongst local Labour politicians. In both cities the Labour-led councils wished to demonstrate, by the houses they were building and providing, that they were unafraid of cutting the ties with the urban milieu fostered by early industrial development.

Anglo-Swedish differences as polarities in the Europeanisation of history

The three local comparisons outlined so far build upon the American political sociologist Barrington Moore's idea of 'suppressed alternatives', or of the possibility of a British historical development in Sweden and a Swedish alternative in Britain.³¹ But this device is deployed as a means of stimulating a dialogue between our cases, rather than a method for establishing absolute similarities or contrasts between national or local cases. In the following section we relate our studies to existing Anglo-Swedish scholarship and reflect how the three different themes, democratisation, co-operation and deindustrialisation, have produced a respective emphasis on Anglo-Swedish similarities and differences.

Despite Jürgen Kocka's recent observation that the decline of national peculiarities has produced an Europeanised version of the twentieth century experience, there has often been a tendency to regard Sweden and Britain as occupying polar positions in a spectrum of political and economic models.³² For the early twentieth century, one of the most influential and enduring explanations of British/Swedish difference cites the nature of the two states and the timing of

³⁰ Newcastle City Council, *Minutes of Evidence*, Newcastle 1961, p.1053.

³¹ Barrington Moore, Jr., *The Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy. Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World*, Boston, 1966.

³² Jürgen Kocka, "Asymmetrical Historical Comparison: The Case of the German 'Sonderweg'", *History and Theory*, 38, 1999, p. 49.

democratisation.³³ In Britain, working men gained some political influence through the suffrage reforms of 1867 and 1884, and the political system was marked by relatively high levels of popular faith in and support for state institutions such as Parliament, the justice system and the monarchy, thus helping to ensure that working-class support for revolutionary movements remained negligible.³⁴ In Sweden, by contrast, the early twentieth-century state remained fairly authoritarian, influenced by an unreformed *riksdag* that was ‘one of the most reactionary of European Parliaments’.³⁵ The suffrage remained restricted and provoked a high level of political conflict until it was reformed in 1909.

The oppositional position of Britain and Sweden in European studies is perhaps most consistently demonstrated in writing about the development of European welfare systems after 1945. Without wishing to discount the nuances within such studies, the ‘British’, or ‘Anglo-saxon’, model has often been characterised as individualistic, residual and minimalist, whilst the ‘Swedish’ welfare system, sometimes interchangeable with ‘Scandinavian’ or ‘Nordic’ models, is characterised as universalist, interventionist, and comprehensive.³⁶ Gøsta Esping-Andersen’s seminal categorisation of the western welfare ‘regimes’ was typical of this Anglo-Swedish polarity and contrasted the ‘liberal’ British model where welfare after 1945 remained residual, with the progressive ‘social democratic’ Swedish or Nordic model in which reforms in the 1950s, particularly pension provision, won the support of an integrated middle class.³⁷ These typologies of welfare have also been used to draw out further differences between European states after 1945, such as in the classification and characterisation of poverty and exclusion. Göran Therborn draws light to the distinction between the emphasis on equality in the Swedish political

³³ Seymour Martin Lipset, “Radicalism or Reformism: The Sources of Working-Class Politics”, *American Political Science Review*, 77, 1983, pp. 1-18; Gregory M Luebbert, *Liberalism, Fascism or Social Democracy: Social Classes and the Political Origins of Regimes in Interwar Europe*, Oxford, 1991; Fulcher, *Labour Movements*.

³⁴ McKibbin, “Why Was There No Marxism?”, pp. 17-24.

³⁵ Berndt Schiller, “Years of Crisis”, in Steven Koblik, ed., *Sweden’s Development From Poverty to Affluence: 1750-1970*, translated Joanne Johnson, Minneapolis, 1975, pp. 197-228: 199.

³⁶ The broad polarisation between a ‘Scandinavian’ and ‘Anglo-Saxon’ approach to welfare provision is reiterated in many different studies; see for example Peter Baldwin, *The Politics of Social Solidarity: Class Basis of the European Welfare State*, Cambridge, 1990; John Clarke, eds., *Comparing Welfare States: Britain in an International Context*, London, 1993; G. Bock and P. Thane, *Maternity and Gender Policies: Women and the Rise of the European Welfare States, 1880s-1950s*, London, 1991.

³⁷ Gøsta Esping-Andersen, “The Making of a Social Democratic Welfare State”, in Klaus Misgeld, Karl Molin, and Klas Åmark, eds., *Creating Social Democracy: A Century of the Social Democratic Labor Part in Sweden*, Pennsylvania, 1988; Esping-Andersen, *Three Worlds*. For differences within

discourse and the preponderance of ‘poverty’ in British and American nomenclature of welfare. The emphasis on equality in Sweden he attributes to the “political success of Swedish Social Democracy”, though he also reflects that it may have its “ancestral base in a free peasant society”.³⁸

How significant are these differences? It is clear that there were some important contrasts in the process of democratisation in Britain and Sweden but these should not be overstated. In no sense was the late Victorian British state a model of democratic accountability and openness. The reforms of 1884-5 were undoubtedly a watershed in the establishment of electoral democracy, but political participation remained restricted by wealth, class and gender. Britain still lagged behind France and Germany, where over 80% and 90% of adult males respectively had the vote.³⁹ Conversely, although the suffrage did remain restricted in Sweden, the characterisation of the pre-war regime as repressive is questionable. Even though working men were denied the franchise, the establishment of alternative corporatist channels of representation gave them access to the state, and showed the state to be not entirely hostile to working-class demands. There was relatively little legal hindrance to unions and strikes, and no tradition of violent military or police repression. Moreover, the firm central control exercised by the Crown was counter-balanced by a long tradition of local autonomy, which actually increased during the last decades of the nineteenth century as municipal governments responded pragmatically to the problems of urbanisation.⁴⁰

Meanwhile, whilst the polarisation between the ‘Anglo-saxon’ and ‘Nordic’ welfare discourses since the 1960s undeniably has some purchase, it remains important to note that an earlier comparative perspective of welfare developments would generate important parallels. For instance during the 1940s the writings of the Myrdals influenced the evolution of both British and European concepts of welfare.⁴¹ Further, as has been seen, there were similarities in the ambitions and expectations for

the Nordic model see Niels Finn Christiansen, et al., eds., *The Nordic Model of Welfare: A Historical Reappraisal*, Copenhagen, 2006.

³⁸ Göran Therborn, *European Modernity and Beyond: The Trajectory of European Societies 1945-2000*, London, 1990, p. 151. See also Øystein Sørensen and Bo Stråth, eds., *The Cultural Construction of Norden*, Oslo, 1997; Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige*, Stockholm, 2006.

³⁹ Marcel van der Linden, “The National Integration of European Working Classes (1871-1914): Exploring the Causal Configuration”, *International Review of Social History*, 33, 1988, pp. 285-311.

⁴⁰ Rune Bokholm, *Städernas handlingsfrihet. En studie av expansionskedet 1900-1930*, Lund, 1995.

⁴¹ Alva Myrdal, *Nation and Family. The Swedish Experiment in Democratic and Population Policy*, London 1945.

the rebuilding of urban communities during the 1950s and 1960s, which could be anchored in the exchange of ideas about citizenship and planned communities that evolved after 1945.⁴² The differences remain, but the cross-over of ideas that brought Newcastle councillors to Malmö during the 1960s also revealed the importance of links between ‘national differences’.

The question we need to raise is whether the polarised characterisation has any validity in explaining national differences, rather than simply re-stating them. The Anglo-Swedish polarity also poses theoretical and conceptual difficulties for a comparison of two cities: should Newcastle be characterised as ‘British’ or ‘Anglo-saxon’, and equally, how far is Malmö ‘Swedish’ or an exemplar of the ‘Scandinavian welfare model’? As Hilson's comparison of Karlskrona and Plymouth demonstrates, a more dynamic view of the ‘franchise factor’ in the rise of Labour in Britain and Sweden implies that the two cases present more similarities than might have been expected. The political background to the rise of Labour was in both cases a dynamic and evolving political system, where important issues such as manhood suffrage and the role of parliament were by no means resolved before the First World War. One of the most important aspects of this political change was the evolving and dynamic relationship between national and local arenas of political activity: between ‘high’ politics and formal political alignments on the one hand, and informal, local politics and political culture on the other.

Yet despite the strong tradition of local and micro-historical studies in both Britain and Sweden, there is still a distinct paucity of studies addressing sub-national units – such as cities, regions or parishes – in a comparative Anglo-Swedish perspective. Our own local studies neither endorse nor deny the importance of national differences. The aim is instead to illustrate how local-case comparisons contribute to a rethinking of the relationship between local and national developments, and ultimately of the national developments themselves. We are not trying to define an ‘Anglo-Swedish comparative research field’, rather to urge for more nuanced comparative studies of cities, regions and localities, and to this end we conclude by turning our attention to more general questions about the comparative approach.

⁴² Although it must be emphasised that in Sweden the development of social policy was perhaps more closely linked to the increase in state resources and state control of social policy during and after the

Anglo-Swedish reflections and the problem of comparative history

One of the main advantages of the cross-national comparative approach over a single-nation study is that it forces the historian to engage with at least two separate historiographical traditions. In the three comparative studies of Britain and Sweden which have been presented here, we understand comparison not so much in Marc Bloch's sense as a systematic method, but we use it instead as an heuristic device: a 'mode of analysis' and an imaginative tool to stimulate thought.⁴³ By exposing assumptions about one national case to the questions posed by another, the comparative approach may compel a re-examination of these assumptions and therefore help to undermine the link between history-writing and nation-building. The examination of one national case in the light of perspectives and questions suggested by another can help to confirm or to challenge the assumptions of national historiography and to emphasise the contingent and open-ended nature of historical change.⁴⁴

A problem for comparative historians arises from the necessity to generalise, which seems to be incompatible with an academic discipline that emphasises the particularities of each individual case.⁴⁵ The practical constraints of handling two or more separate cases mean that comparative historians are frequently forced to base their accounts on secondary literature in preference to primary sources. This also means that the majority of single-authored comparative history deals with no more than two cases, unlike the multi-case comparisons often pursued by sociologists or political scientists. Because of these difficulties historians have been reluctant to put forward universal laws or models from their comparative studies, preferring to leave that task to the social scientists. But this need not be a problem, or even a necessary aim of comparative history. Indeed, it could be argued that it is the task of the

Second World War. Ulla Ekström von Essen, *Folkemets kommun: socioldemokratiska idéer om lokalsamhället 1939-1952*, Stockholm, 2003.

⁴³ Marc Bloch, "Toward a Comparative History of European Societies", in Frederic C Lane and Jelle C Riermersma, eds., *Enterprise and Secular Change: Readings in Economic History*, Homewood, Illinois, 1953; first published 1928, pp. 494-521: 515; Cohen and O'Connor, 'Introduction', p. xii.

⁴⁴ John Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism in Nineteenth Century Europe: Essays in Comparative History*, Manchester, 1992, p. 19; Peter Baldwin, "Comparing and Generalizing: Why All History Is Comparative, Yet No History Is Sociology", in Cohen and O'Connor, eds., *Comparison and History*, pp. 1-22: 4; Berger, 'Comparative History', pp. 164-5. See also Ilaria Favretto, *The Long Search for the Third Way: The British Labour Party and the Italian Left Since 1945*, Basingstoke, 2002, which demonstrates how the comparative method can relativise the rhetoric of exceptionalism.

⁴⁵ Baldwin, "Comparing and Generalizing", p. 1; Haupt and Kocka, "Comparative History", p. 25.

comparative historian not so much to create new laws as to test and challenge the validity of existing ones arising out of work in the social sciences. Further, since comparative historians need to write their narratives in a way that allows generalisations to be drawn between their subjects, they are particularly alive to some of the challenges that have been central to history-writing since the advent of post-modernist perspectives.

During the 1990s the retreat from Marxist explanatory paradigms prompted a degree of uncertainty over historical practice and method. Amongst both British and Swedish historians a distinction emerged between those resisting attempts to impugn traditional approaches or devalue the importance and possibility of historical objectivity, and those arguing that the task for historians was to bring to light the irreducible character of events. Cross-national or comparative studies have occupied an ambiguous position in this debate. They can make no defence of 'objectivity' since their historical narratives are driven by comparative and methodological considerations.⁴⁶ On the other hand, although comparison is equipped to relativise national exceptionalism, it does not follow that it is equivalent to absolute relativism. Indeed, it seems that the comparative method may assist historians in responding to the challenges of post-modernism, summarised by the Swedish historian Roddy Nilsson as the need for historians "to formulate theoretically informed questions, [to engage in] epistemological and methodological reflection, as well as an awareness of the form of representation and its consequences." [translation]⁴⁷ Moreover, we suggest that comparative history may address some of the problems of national explanations as 'imprisoned in their own immediacy', and that this is realised by generalising within cases.⁴⁸ Since we use the comparative tool as a heuristic device, our ambition has principally been to establish a dialogue between our cases. The practical and intellectual challenges that underpin the historical study of two or more cases have been explicit in the comparison of Karlskrona and Plymouth, Newcastle Co-operative Society and Solidar, Malmö and Newcastle, and have helped to furnish a dynamic dialogue between the cases. To take Friberg's research strategy as a case in

⁴⁶ Scott Madelbrote, "History, Narrative, Time", *History of European Ideas*, 5:22, 1996, pp. 337-350; Patrick Joyce, "History and Post-Modernism", *Past and Present*, 133: 1991, p.208.

⁴⁷ Roddy Nilsson, "Postmodernism, källkritik och historieskrivning", *Historisk Tidskrift*, 2005:2, pp. 233-248: 246. For a discussion of the benefits of a comparative approach in this way, see also Dick Geary, "Labour History, the 'Linguistic Turn' and Postmodernism", *Contemporary European History*, 9:3, 2000, pp. 445-462: 458 and Nancy Green, "The Comparative Method and Post Structuralism: New Perspectives for Migration Studies", *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 4: 1994, p. 70.

point, here there has been an attempt to temporarily bracket the ‘national’ and foreground instead the details of organisational life in her two co-operative societies. This in itself goes against the grain of the national histories of co-operation, for they tend to invite explanations in terms of external processes, particularly changes in the economic environment. Still this approach is not a dismissal of external factors altogether. Nor is the link to the national level severed once and for all. The world outside the local societies does enter the study, only filtered through the minute books, member voices, and balance sheets. The national context has, in this sense, also functioned as a heuristic device, rather than as a predetermining factor that explains local characteristics.

The three comparative studies discussed here thus respond to recent calls for cross-national comparisons that take regional or local histories as their starting point.⁴⁹ We argue that the integration of micro-level studies based on extensive empirical work with a cross-national comparison can help to resolve some of the problems arising from the inevitable demands for some degree of abstraction and generalisation required of comparison. Most importantly, as the three studies presented here demonstrate, it can help to throw some light on the complex relationships between different levels of historical analysis: local, regional and national.

To return to our question in the previous section, how does our attempt to ‘bracket’ the national comparative context, and our commitment to a dynamic and open comparative approach, which is principally interested in procedural developments rather than absolute similarities and differences, relate to the question of why and how to compare Britain and Sweden? Firstly, it must be acknowledged that despite our attempts at an overarching characterisation of the Anglo-Swedish research field, historical comparisons between the two countries are relatively rare.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, London, 1973, p. 23.

⁴⁹ Jürgen Kocka, “Probleme einer europäischen Geschichte in komparativer Absicht”, in Kocka, *Geschichte und Aufklärung*, Göttingen, 1989, pp. 21-28: 25; Breuilly, *Labour and Liberalism*, p. 20; Haupt and Kocka, “Comparative History”, pp. 34-36. For examples of cross-national comparisons that deal with regions and/or cities, see Roger Fagge, *Power, Culture and Conflict in the Coalfields: West Virginia and South Wales, 1900-1922*, Manchester, 1996; Madeleine Hurd, *Public Spheres, Public Mores and Democracy: Hamburg and Stockholm 1870-1914*, Ann Arbor, 2000.

⁵⁰ There are however a number of British-Swedish comparative studies in the social sciences, in addition to the three historical monographs by the authors of this article: Jonas Hinnfors, *Reinterpreting Social Democracy: A History of Stability in the British Labour Party and the Swedish Social Democratic Party*, Manchester, 2006; Jenny Andersson, ‘The People’s Library and the Electronic Workshop: Comparing Swedish and British Social Democracy’, *Politics and Society*, 34, 2006, pp.

History writing in both these countries has been strongly influenced by the nationalist paradigm, and perhaps it would be fair to say that this continues to be the case.⁵¹ There remains a strong distinction between ‘British’ and ‘European’ history in most university history departments. Meanwhile, Swedish historians have been remarkably reluctant to examine Swedish history in a Nordic or Scandinavian perspective, despite the existence of mutually comprehensible languages and a tradition among political scientists in particular of treating the Nordic region as one. Drawing on Peter Aronsson's recent analysis of Swedish doctoral dissertations we might conclude that it has often been historians from outside the region who have been most interested in attempting Nordic (or even Baltic) history.⁵²

But as we have endeavoured to show Britain and Sweden are no more nor less comparable than any other two states, particularly if the unit of analysis is local. We have further tried to demonstrate that the comparative approach does not necessarily reinforce the idea of national particularities. Provided that the comparison is deployed primarily as a heuristic device then the local study may raise and address questions that are as interesting and important as national considerations. Our local comparisons concerned the nature of democratisation, participation, deindustrialisation and community building in Plymouth and Karlskrona, Newcastle Co-operative Society and Solidar, and Malmö and Newcastle. Often these questions prompted further interrogation *within* the comparison. Whilst the national context remained a point of reference we have not allowed the apparently striking Anglo-Swedish differences to dominate our studies. National explanations tend to enforce a separation of units and in our studies questions that have been raised about more than one historical context have also generated reflections that necessarily refer to more than one historical context. To this end we conclude that the comparative method, practised as a heuristic

431-460; James Fulcher, *Labour Movements, Employers and the State: Conflict and Co-operation in Britain and Sweden*, Oxford, 1991; Malcolm B Hamilton, *Democratic Socialism in Britain and Sweden*, Basingstoke, 1989; Hecló, *Modern Social Politics*; Margaret Weir and Theda Skocpol, “State Structures and the Possibilities for ‘Keynesian’ Responses to the Great Depression in Sweden, Britain and the United States”, in Peter B Evans, Dietrich Rueschemeyer and Theda Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In*, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 107-163.

⁵¹ Hall, *Den svenskaste historien*; Benedikt Stuchtey, “Literature, Liberty and Life of the Nation: British Historiography from Macaulay to Trevelyan”, in Stefan Berger, Mark Donovan and Kevin Passmore, eds., *Writing National Histories: Western Europe since 1800*, London, 1999, pp. 30-48.

⁵² Peter Aronsson, “Svenska avhandlingar i historia 1997-2001”, in Staffan Wahlén, *Utvärdering av grundutbildning och forskarutbildning i historia vid svenska universitet och högskolor*, Stockholm, 2003, pp. 163-196. For examples see D G Kirby, *Northern Europe in the Early Modern Period: The Baltic World 1492-1772*, London, 1990; D G Kirby, *The Baltic World 1772-1993: Europe's Northern*

search for similarities and differences across space, may transcend national borders without reinforcing dominant national paradigms.

Periphery in an Age of Change, London, 1995; Harald Gustafsson, *Nordens historia. En europeisk region under 1200 år*, Lund, 1997.