The possibilities of conceptual history 'from above' and 'from below':
Reflections on *samhälle* ‘society’ in Sweden, 1700 to 1990

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A linguistic turn is obvious in the development of new perspectives in history during the last decade. In Sweden, as in many countries, social history constantly has widened its scope and influence since the 1960’s. In the 1980's the interest in language in both methodological and theoretical respects has influenced the perspective of historians mainly through two channels: first, with great impact all over the world but theoretically not very elaborated, the history of mentalities in the Annales tradition and partly as an offspring the emerging genre of historical anthropology. Secondly a theoretically much more elaborated discourse analyses, in the beginning predominantly inspired by the works of Michel Foucault on the relation between power, language and institutions. Feminist theory and deconstructivism has it’s proponents but has as yet not produced much published research in the departments of History, at least not in Sweden.¹

These renewals has often been received and developed in a structuralist tradition. The problems created by this approach has mainly to do with the difficulties to problematize, give account for and explain historical change. A turn to more actor oriented approaches is clearly perceivable though theoretically very divergent, ranging from Giddens structuration theory to a sharp rise in the production of rather traditional political history and biographical studies.

Only in the early 1990’s conceptual history, Begriffsgeschichte, in the generally rather theoretically oriented Swedish historical research, has been recognized as a possible perspective to renew the interpretation and interrelation between the new turn to political history and the still dominant and productive tradition of social history. Could this be a fruitful way to renew the constant discussion of how to perceive the prevailing problem of the relationship between actors and structure in history?²

This article is an exercise to find out the methodological implications of a combination of a more lexicographic approach to the fundamental concept of society, samhälle, with a more social historical, praxis oriented reconstruction of how the concept was used in local politics, even though the word itself seldom came into usage. A combination of methods that in my view is necessary to develop more adequately the possibilities of Begriffsgeschichte as a part of social historical tradition.

I

In the 1980s, society (samhället) and state (staten) as concepts have once again been problematized, finding themselves at the centre of a debate which concerns everything from changes in Swedish economic policy, the question of democracy, the disintegration of Eastern Europe, and the integration of Western Europe.³

The opposition between state and society is central, and the concept of “civil society” is introduced in swedish language, originally to describe the “counter-society” built up by Solidarity in Poland: “Civil society is the activity carried on by the citizens themselves and not regulated by the state: associations, the press, and other independent institutions.”⁴ The thread is immediately followed and applied to local self-government, the municipality: “The town belongs to civil society, the municipality to the authorities’ society. It is not good to mix the concepts.”⁵ In the ensuing debate, many people have expressed views about the social relations that should be included in society and to what extent they should be free of state power; to what extent politics is only a state concern and society only the market, and so on.⁶
A preliminary terminus in the debate, which is simultaneously an indicator of the new direction, came in the policy declaration of the non-socialist government in Sweden in 1991: “Far too often, the state and public power have been regarded as synonymous with society. But now the age of collectivism is over. In our Sweden, society will always be bigger than the state.” It is only in the little society that solidarity can develop naturally, while competition is the natural thing for the big society. According to Hans Zetterberg, scholar and articulate ideologist of the Moderate Party, society includes two spheres: the public sphere of the market, where razor-sharp competition should prevail, and the private sphere of the family, the little society, with a free outlet for emotion and caring. The intervention of the state in both these spheres should be minimal. This reminds us of the bourgeoisie’s nineteenth-century project as it has been reconstructed and analysed by, for example, Reinhard Koselleck and Jürgen Habermas. All that is missing – and this is remarkable – is the combination of private and public which the bourgeois public sphere constituted.

It has been maintained that it is typically Swedish and typical of Swedish Social Democracy that the distinction between state and society has been weakly developed. For various reasons the tradition of natural law has had few advocates, which has made it difficult to find a basis on which to assert and legitimate rights which do not emanate from consensus or the state. Traditionally this conceptual collapse has been ascribed to a strong and centralized state from Gustavus I in the 16th century and onwards. Following this line of argument, David Easton’s definition of the state as the institution that has a real monopoly on authoritative value allocation was true to a greater extent in Sweden than in the rest of the western world.

In this paper part of the theses will be the opposite argument: the close connection between society and state are more due to an extraordinary strong and well organized ‘people', that is in the early days a dominant group of freeholding peasants with political and juridical capacities far above the European average and later on a strong working class movement, and to a relatively weak state, prepared to negotiate with broad strata of commoners.

More general integration tendencies in industrial society also led to a blurred boundary between state and society from the epoch that is sometimes called organized capitalism, beginning at the end of the nineteenth century. A similar general tendency is also hidden in the very idea of the nation: the expression of the nation is the territorial state power, but its legitimacy is based on the fact that it reflects the will of the people in one way or another. Universal suffrage and representative democracy are gradually forced through as the most effective way to guarantee a close and legitimate relation between individual, society, and state in the nation.

Perhaps we may begin here by letting a definition of the term society from a turn-of-the-century dictionary of synonyms show the natural link in language between, on the one hand, the “private” (enskild) society of nineteenth-century liberalism, well demarcated and protected against a “public” (allmän) state power, and on the other hand, the twentieth-century conception of the welfare society as identical with state and municipality, a conception cherished by integrationism, Social Democracy, and Swedes in general: “Society, Civil Society, State, association of people who live together under a common government or rule and with common laws.”
In this paper, besides using insights obtained from secondary literature, I shall apply two methods to paint a picture of the way the concept of society has been built up and changed. This should provide a basis for shedding light on the – perhaps not surprising – methodological difficulties of simultaneously satisfying the demands for general validity, lucidity, and precision:

- The concept of society as it stands out in the printed word, above all in the excerpts collected by the archive of the Swedish Academy’s dictionary (Svenska Akademiens Ordbok, SAOB). The selection is of course beyond my control, but the aim of the dictionary is to cover all genres of literature. The material is easily accessible, but the breadth is greater and the impressions thereby more difficult to sort than if one follows the normal path for the analysis of an ideology: penetrating one thinker or one tradition of thought. Laws, fiction, and textbooks are represented in the excerpts that I have used. I nevertheless think that it is possible to discern, at least hypothetically, a discourse- and time-bound use of the concept. It is always possible to question the impact of the concept on a culture: to what extent can we envisage variation between social groups and regions and to what extent does the analysis reveal such fundamental features of the discourse that they are shared by everyone?

- A concrete political and social historical analysis of the concept of society as it stands out in practical local politics, parish self-government, at the end of the eighteenth century and in the mid-nineteenth century. This method gives a better chance of paying due attention to the significance of the context for the development and use of the concept. When the concept is not subject to theoretical reflection and is only rarely expressly used, the analysis requires a higher degree of reconstruction. In addition, the general validity can be discussed in a comparable way as for the more intellectual material used in the first method – but the other way around: are the findings valid outside the studied local community?

The early nineteenth century saw the development of a number of forms of bourgeois public sphere in Sweden: the provincial press and the associations are among the more central examples. A less “pure” form of bourgeois public sphere, but no less interesting for our purposes, is the kommun, which is normally translated as ‘municipality’, but for which I shall use the literal translation ‘commune’. What role did the communes play as arenas for political practice and experience, or in their new, extended place in the ideological debate? The debate about the communes and their place in society will also be analysed here. This is all the more relevant in that the practice-oriented part of my conceptual analysis is based on communal material.

The aim of the essay is thus to sketch the change in the concept of society from the eighteenth century until the present day, with the emphasis on a long nineteenth century, and to problematize the methods for accomplishing such a study. A short cut to analysis in the tradition of the history of ideas is contrasted with an analysis based on conceptual meanings which can be reconstructed on the basis of more everyday practice.
II

In social research with a historical perspective, both state and society are concepts which are sharply dichotomized into old and modern.

Looking first at the state, we see that its development is often described less as a straight evolutionary line than is the case with changes in society. It was not until the nineteenth century that the absolute monarchy, military state, tax state, or unitary state of former times was replaced with a modern liberal state, a state borne by and criticized by a bourgeoisie who want to increase the scope for “society” – the power of the state is to be defined and confined as much as possible. A new capitalist industrial society requires new forms of organization. In the latter half of the nineteenth century and especially in the twentieth century, the interventionist character of the state increases once again; to achieve coordination and social integration and stability, organized capitalism requires a state power that is active within certain limits.\(^\text{13}\)

Society is often more easily dichotomized, albeit in a multitude of variants. The essence of the change is usually that the old collectivist society, based on traditional organic (or if one prefers Durkheim’s word, mechanical) solidarity in a limited local community, is replaced by an atomized, individualist community established by contract and negotiation: Gemeinschaft is replaced by Gesellschaft.\(^\text{14}\)

Definitions of the concepts of society and state, and the relation between them, are of course a constant topic of scholarly discussion. It may also be possible to find in research an increased effort to find limiting definitions of the power of the state and extended definitions of society.\(^\text{15}\)

It is not, however, the scholarly, more or less sophisticated interpretations which will be discussed here. It is the concept of society as a historically changing category that is the primary stuff of this essay.

The wider conceptual context is the new understanding of politics that developed out of the Enlightenment, the French Revolution, and similar processes in other countries. Increased social differentiation has a conceptual counterpart in the discussion of the correct and relevant boundary to draw between the modern senses of public–private, general–individual, state–society; concepts such as market, politics, justice, administration, association, religion are all given new specifications and shifted positions in relation to one another. The key words in the change are specification and differentiation.

III

\textit{SAOB} has a systematic typological analysis of the concept of society, in which the following meanings of \textit{samhälle} are distinguished:

1. emphasis on the concord obtaining between parties.
2. aggregations to further the common good of persons or states, sometimes tending towards contractual relations: companies, associations, clubs.
3. a unit of people who live relatively closely together, bound by territories, kinship, shared customs, or other relations, ranging all the way from the family to the nation.
I shall try to show here that the excerpts in the SAOB archive, which form the basis for this typology, can also be structured chronologically to provide a foundation for the historical analysis of the concept.

Under Lutheran orthodoxy, with its zenith coinciding with the second half of Sweden’s period as a great power, late 17th century, people thought in terms of organic and corporative metaphors in a religious framework: Sweden and its people are like a house or a body, of which the various members each have a set task to carry out if the whole is to function harmoniously. In religious terms the doctrine of the three estates of society is expressed in a section of Luther’s widely spread catechism: the Hustavla or *tabula oeconomic* a set of biblical quotations legitimating the social order and illustrating the mutual obligations of the members of different orders. The word *samhälle* ‘society’ is not attested in this context.

In the mid-eighteenth century, the nobility and the state became highly active in their attempts to reform the agrarian economy. They sought to find forms for change where the voluntary element was significant, even though the reforms were politically sanctioned in ordinances from the King in Council.

The 1742 ordinance to establish village councils (*byalag*) initiated half a century of more or less ambitious projects where new, secularized municipal creations, often supposed to be led by the enlightened local elite for the benefit of the peasant economy, took shape: parish agricultural associations, fire insurance funds, schools, and parish storehouses are central features in the proposals that were put forward and implemented with greater or lesser success in reality.

Sometimes the term *samhälle* itself is used in the proposals. J. Faggot, the landowner behind the first modern enclosure, *storskifte*, in the mid-seventeenth century, placed the following proposal before the Academy of Sciences in 1750: “I would therefore, for the benefit of my dear fellow countrymen, propose some occasion for how those who are neighbours in the countryside, dwelling within the same parish, could join certain societies or companies for joint forestry management.”

The King in Council declared in a statute about parish storehouses that “No one has the freedom to exempt from this arrangement any of the homesteads included in this society.”

The voluntary element is clear; the relation is chosen (even though law might be helpful in keeping it fixed), not assigned by birth. Or, as Boëthius says in 1782: “By society one really means the union of several people, entered into by agreement, for common security and comfort, the strength of which consists in exercising the united forces of its members to attain the goals of the society. In this sense *samhälle* differs from *samfund*.” It is clear that one of Sweden’s first political economists, A. Berch, thought that there need be no conflict between the chosen and the assigned in social relations. As long as they were maintained by free will for the general good, society could be materialized both in a town and in the forms of cooperation practised in the countryside: “By civil society I understand not only the way of life to which they who have settled in some town have bound themselves, in which respect living together in towns is contrasted with living in the countryside, but I mean by it both these ways of life and a congregation which with assembled forces contributes to mutual
welfare.” This view, systematically elaborated and loaded with the dynamite of Enlightenment ideas, reached Sweden first in the publication *Tankar om Borgerliga Friheten* (Thoughts about Civil Freedom), which was prohibited by the censors in 1759.

When the word appears for the first time, at the start of the eighteenth century, it is very clearly as a bearer of new historical tendencies. This late appearance of the word probably distinguishes the Swedish concept of society from its European counterparts. The new meaning it represents is not exceptional, taking various forms and expressions all over western Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries.

The state chose quite early not to trust only the old absolutistic rhetoric, but realistic enough during the parliamentary era of 18th century, and considering the relative weakness of the state, to cache on to the positive meaning of the new word in order to legitimize power and try to apply some of its connotations of liberty, concord, and unity to the state (1752): “Firm trust between the King, the Council, and the Estates, as the most important part upon which the survival and security of the realm and society depend.”

The fact that the concept was still not overloaded with Utopian hopes is shown by its use of such unwelcome associations as the religious sect of the Åkianer, supporters of Åke Svensson of Östragöl. They regarded him, a peasant, as the only true priest, but the consistory complained that “through these vulgarities the people of the congregation have become so tired of them that no one here in the parish... is in their society but Åke’s family of Östergöl.”

The eighteenth century exemplifies the practical use of the concept of society in the sense of company, association, or even the people in a state in toto. This development must be seen in principle as opposed to the official corporative social ideology as developed in the Hustavla.

The use of the concept of society in the Enlightenment gradually shifted towards a more loaded, goal-directed political discourse into which the concept of nation entered. The society–state relationship was thematized and problematized in different ways depending on the political orientation of the debaters and thinkers.

It may seem like a long step to, if I may say so, the overstrung philosophizing about society, the state, and the nation that emerged after the French Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. The massive claims made by Geijer, Agardh, Boström, and others give an impression not only of the philosophical style of the times but also of the urgency of the project. The rapid change of social relations: proletarianization, pauperization, commercialization, and secularization engendered an almost desperate need to unite in thought a development that was felt in many ways to be a dissolution. “Society” became an important component in a new, secularized, integrative principle when theocracy was disintegrating.

E. G. Geijer, however, was aware of the shift in meaning that he helped to give to the concept: “We have hitherto used the word society now in its general, now in its stricter meaning. In the latter it means chiefly civil society or the state; in the former it comprises all kinds of community, both natural and voluntary, between people.” The purely idealistic and Utopian element in his thought comes out more distinctly in an earlier work in which society is the idea, “the invisible, eternal society, which can never exist on earth as a separate state, and the members of it are merely the people of all nations who are wholly elevated above
private intentions, working and living only for ideas, for the supreme goals of humanity, and are thus in a true sense citizens of the world."\textsuperscript{26}

The transition of the concept of society and its incorporation in the concept of nation is completed when, instead of being a voluntary association of equals for a particular purpose, it is equated by Agardh with the fatherland which certainly “does not exist for the private purposes of each citizen, but for everyone’s common purpose.”\textsuperscript{27}

The organic idea of society gives a partly new meaning to the relation between the family and society. I mentioned briefly above the new view of the place and function of the family which manifested itself in the 1980s: the solidarity and intimacy of the little society against the competition of the big society on the one hand and the intervention of the state on the other. Although this intellectual tradition traces its roots to the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, at this time the organic idea and analogy were at least as strong. Geijer said in 1820 that “Man is himself the smallest society, and has within him diversity and conflict which it is his task to bring into concord. Society offers the same human conditions in greater measure, being itself the greater human being.”\textsuperscript{28}

In many ways, the development of the commune follows the same course as the concept of society. There is an earlier use of the word \textit{kommun}, originally in ecclesiastical contexts above all, to designate the common property of canons in the sixteenth century. Subsequently the word was perhaps most frequently used as an adjective, at least until the nineteenth century. In the seventeenth century it was used synonymously with \textit{gemensam} ‘shared, common’. Peasants could have “Mulebete Comunt med grannarne” (grazing in common with the neighbours). The term could also refer to peasants’ relations to the nobility in the diet and the relation between two churches’ property. There were no strong pejorative undertones to the word, although a semantic shift towards ‘common’ in the sense of ‘everyday, usual’ took place during the eighteenth century.\textsuperscript{29}

Just as in the case of the concept of society, many nineteenth-century thinkers seized on the freedom and the voluntary potential in the concept of commune and held it up as an alternative to the prevailing order. The ideal picture, however, in the case of commune, was not located solely in the realm of ideas but also placed in a concrete historiography in the material world. But there was no agreement at the beginning about whether the idea of the commune was embodied in free towns or leagues of towns, in parishes or hundred courts. In 1818 Geijer wrote that “in every free commune, in every league of towns which freed itself from the bonds of feudal dependence, from the beginning [the kings in Europe saw] with satisfaction immediate subjects.” It is not self-evident which unit in the real world he means when he declares that “the commune, in its simple origin a union between adjacent independent households for common peace and security, cannot presuppose any natural authority, but must establish authority through agreement.”\textsuperscript{30} The hundred court (\textit{häradsrätt}), or the ancient assembly (\textit{ting}) was probably the institution he had in mind. Nordström states this expressively in 1839: “The communes in the countryside, or the hundreds, in the course of the development of society, have lost their right to elect their judges and propose them for appointment by the Monarch.”\textsuperscript{31}

The meaning that is natural for us first emerged in the drafting and final wording of the ordinance on local government in the early 1860s. The legislators were looking for a word
which did not have the same religious connotations as socken (parish) and wanted to capture the fact that “two or more parishes could make up one commune”, the smallest unit of government. They also declared that the size of the territory was not decisive, but to what extent “self-activity for common concerns is assigned to it” – this is what distinguishes it from state administration. The constitution states that “every parish in the countryside constitutes in itself a separate commune, whose members themselves have the right . . . to look after their common concerns of order and economy.”

There was still no total identification of kommun and sockenkommun, the parish communes. Nevertheless it is normal for kommun after 1862 to refer to rural districts (landskommuner), both ecclesiastical and civil, as well as towns. From the 1890s we have a few instances of the commune no longer being perceived as private, belonging to the non-state sphere of society, but as an example of “the states within the state” along with the counties (läns); the division of labour between them is an administrative question, as I. Leffler and C. Rosenberg said at this time. This way of thinking was blended with the older idea of commune as community (gemenskap). This concurrence, or if you like, shift of meaning, is one precondition for the Swedish integration of the concepts of commune, state, and society. Background factors giving substantial content to the process were of course the demand for universal suffrage, nationalism, individual taxation systems, and compulsory military service!

The idea can be said to be fully developed in the second edition of the encyclopaedia Nordisk Familjebok, which was widely spread in the 1920s and 1930s, where kommun is defined thus: “a society within a state which occupies a particular territory and as an agent of the state works for its goals, while at the same time taking care of its own internal affairs.”

The picture that emerges from the SAOB excerpts is confirmed by research in the area. The question of local self-government was given a new ideological charge in the nineteenth century, when liberalism began to see the communes as an important tool for establishing the “night-watchman state” and for creating a liberal citizen and individual. It is not without interest to observe that several of the debaters saw it as the re-establishment of an old state of affairs when the communes had been independent. What had survived was the pitiful remnant of parish self-government on which to build. Most radical and consistent in his views of the means that should be used to achieve this was C. F. Waern, who argued in the parliamentary debate in 1840–41 that it was not incumbent on the national government to enact such laws. Self-government was a natural right which had been impeded by the state. What should now be done was to clear away the impediments, not to create communes or force them into being by legislation – this would conflict with the very essence of the communal spirit.

Harald Gustafsson has considered the parliamentary debates that preceded the great local government reforms in the Nordic countries. A feature they all have in common, according to Gustafsson, is that they objectively function as yet another element in the aspiration of the state to achieve integration, this time as far down as possible, by creating local bourgeois public spheres where the citizens can be developed to take part in the life of the new nation state. The nineteenth-century debaters could possibly subscribe to this view from their partly different subjective angles: some of them as defenders of an organic view of the state and of the parish assembly chaired by the vicar as a defence of the traditional
system; others as advocates of the integrative principles of a new age – free interaction between free individuals on the foundation of citizenship. The commune is defined as belonging to the private sphere, belonging to the individuals as private persons, not to the public sphere where the state can legitimately assert its right to act. In the debate of the 1850s, increased “participation” is the key concept to achieve the goals of the advocates of decentralization. In concrete terms, they wanted to achieve these by releasing a communal spirit and getting the commune to function as a unit for educating the citizens and uniting the nation in a spirit of intimacy and commitment, without bureaucratic organization and administration. When Ingemar Norrlid points out that this “citizen theory” of the commune is a new view in relation to an old perception of the commune as a “company” for the interested parties who paid the expenses, he exposes a self-contradiction in the liberal project for the communes, a contradiction which provides the dynamism for the future development of the idea: its integrative component will gradually oust its libertarian component. This is most distinct in the parliamentary debates of the 1910s. Decentralization became an instrument for fair taxation and equality (integration) rather than a political goal in itself.

Having thus provided a perspective on the general spirit of the debates, Gustafsson then analyses the specific national form taken by the debates in the political context of each Nordic country. For Sweden he concludes that the political context was the struggle of the commoners for general representation. The local government reform of 1862 was seen as a step on the way, a partial victory, which set the pattern for how participation in the government of the nation should be organized. This link can be traced further back in time before the debates preceding the 1862 reform. Torkel Jansson sees the roots in the early 1830s, and with a slightly broader definition of a liberal project (against the influence of officials, in favour of separating the ecclesiastical from the secular), there are points of contact as far back as the 1820s. At the same time, Jansson argues that the idea of the “communes” can be adapted to just about any political programme, so long as it is filled with the right content. This is admittedly true, but the impression of the parliamentary debates, as Gunnar Swensson and others have described them, is nevertheless that it is the liberal arguments and the liberal project that propelled development in the mid-nineteenth century.

A central political issue in much of the nineteenth century was “the social question”. Legislation laid by far the greatest responsibility for poor relief on the parish assembly and its poor-law board. In the parliamentary debate of the mid-nineteenth century, these institutions, like the parish assembly in general, are mostly understood as communal – that is, belonging to society, to individuals in collaboration. When people at this time discussed poverty as a social problem in parliament, they meant that the state, although it could exert pressure, could not and should not directly try to solve the problem.

The position of the peasant estate does not emerge so clearly from the discussions of the commune, but the issue does not appear to have had the same ideological charge for them as it did for representatives of the nobility and parts of the bourgeoisie. This alone can nourish the suspicion that the peasants’ experience did not fully agree with the liberal opinions.

The first decades of the twentieth century saw the start of a change in the view of the relationship between commune, society, and state. As the state started to enjoin the communes to carry out certain activities, and moreover as people began to perceive certain
traditional activities – such as poor relief – as state concerns “by nature”, there developed a
discourse in which a dichotomy was seen in the work of the commune. On the one hand there
were genuine communal concerns organized and governed by the local community, which the
state thus had nothing to do with, and on the other hand there was delegated or devolved state
competence.\textsuperscript{42}

In parallel to this, a less loaded concept of society began to gain ground around the turn
of the century. More abstract, neutral, sociological definitions occurred, making it possible for
“every group of people living together” to be reckoned as a society.\textsuperscript{43} Society was de-
ideologized as a concept so that it could be used in scientific studies. This was possible when
state idealism as a philosophy had lost its progressiveness and was on the way to becoming
obsolete. The great changes in society that were taking place could not be made
comprehensible, could not be legitimated, much less prevented with the old kind of
pretentious integrative philosophy. The new objectivity, just as pretentious in fact, although
less so in style, took its place. It was from now that the word \textit{samhälle} could be used of any
town or village, so that even non-Utopian Eslöv or Gemla can be described as “societies”.\textsuperscript{44}

With the regulation of more and more of the commune’s spheres of operation, its work
comes under the aegis of society and it is subsidized or entirely financed with state funds and
becomes “public”. Since 1970 there has been a vigorous expansion of communal commitments,
and the commune has become a predominant part of the public sector. The amalgamation of
communes in the 1950s and 1970s has meant that the work of the communes has been
removed from the private, intimate sphere and increasingly become administered by
bureaucrats. For this reason, the criticism of state monopolies in the 1980s was just as much
directed against communal activities. The main way that has been chosen to meet the criticism
has been to transform communal work in various ways, either turning it into the production of
services in competition with others or making it highly concentrated and subject to efficient
decision-making.\textsuperscript{45} The other possibility, to politicize the commune again, to return it to the
sphere of civil society, also has its advocates. There is very little to suggest, however, that
this “old liberal” line of development will have any real influence in practice or in the world of
ideas in the foreseeable future.\textsuperscript{46}

To sum up, this study, mainly based on an analysis of excerpts in the \textit{SAOB} archive,
but supplemented with some findings from research into pre-industrial social ideology, the
communes, and societal integration in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, allows us
to draw up a rough periodization of the concept of society:

I. Under Lutheran orthodoxy, a hierarchically organized religious concept of society prevails.
   Hilding Pleijel calls this the world of the \textit{Hustavla}.

II. In the mid-eighteenth century the explicit concept of society is launched and charged with
   the ideals of the Enlightenment: voluntary, libertarian, striving for the common good.
   These are the characteristics of societies, whether they are towns, companies, or parish
   storehouses.

III. Although the state already in the eighteenth century approved the features that were
    positive for it – the emphasis on concord and the general good – it was not until the first
    half of the nineteenth century that the philosophy of state idealism set its stamp on the
concept of society. It was now transformed from practical fellowship into a conceivable goal to strive for, an unattainable ideal. No less importantly, society became larger, more important than its members – individuals had to conform to the demands of this larger unit, not vice versa. At the same time, politicians were looking for more concrete models for both conservative and liberal Utopias: the commune became a central institution in the nation-building project.

IV. State idealism is not able at the end of the nineteenth century to give a credible, legitimate vision of how societal integration can be achieved. A new objectivity makes itself felt in the concept of society as well. A society is merely a collection of people with one or more things in common; it is enough that they live in the same place or in the same state.

V. The integrationist feature in societal development can blossom once again and become one of the most important super-ideological determinants of the Swedes’ understanding of the welfare state. With universal suffrage, Hägerström’s legal positivism where political power is the only source of justice, and the vision of the welfare state – the “home for the people”, folkhemmet – almost all distinctions between society and state are obliterated.

VI. From the 1980s, the public sector starts to lose its legitimacy. People again search for lost distinctions between state and society. New trends in social research and perhaps also categories and oppositions from the nineteenth century are picked up, revised, and given new currency. State and commune are contrasted with the private market and family solidarity, which together are called (civil) society.

If this outline has any validity, even if it is not sufficiently well corroborated here, we can ask the important question: what impact have these shifts in meanings and definitions had in the way ordinary people think? What consequences did they have for the way society was built?

The questions could be studied on many levels. Here I choose to study the commune, the unit of local government, for two reasons: firstly, the communes were central in the nineteenth-century ideological battle against unitary state power; secondly, through the local studies conducted for my doctoral dissertation Bönder gör politik, I have a body of material which makes it possible to study local practice. The question is whether the picture emerging from a study of societal practice on a more everyday level is similar to the one we obtain from a study of the debate and the printed word on the national stage.

IV

Can one find such fundamental concepts and meanings that they signify the same things in all social strata and regions? In some sense the answer must be yes – otherwise communication would not be possible, nor would this discussion. But here it is the differences that I shall consider. What more or less conflicting shades of meaning can we see in the concept of society if we move from the official conceptual world of the printed word and look at the reality of the rural peasantry? What perception of society is revealed in the activities of the parish assembly, the local, communal social arena?47
In the pre-industrial parish community, there were several perceptions of the basis for the legitimacy of the parish assembly. The official, religious and political sanction was that the parish assembly fell under the privileges of the clergy. It was the right and duty of the vicar to summon the assembly, to chair the meeting, to take the initiative in matters of an ecclesiastical-communal nature, and to keep minutes of the decisions taken.

An analysis of the contents shows that the matters treated by the parish assembly at the end of the seventeenth century and the start of the eighteenth to a large extent concerned church matters of both a practical and a moral kind. The vicar appears to take the main initiatives, and the minutes seek to paint a picture that agrees with the Hustavla and its doctrine of three estates of society, where the vicar is the good shepherd and the parishioners his obedient listeners. The form, however, is scarcely able to conceal the peasants’ view of the nature of parish self-government: it is they who build the church and the vicarage, in many cases they elect the vicar and maintain him – self-government is primarily in their hands. The Reformation made the church so poor that every extra expense required the consent, labour, and financial contributions of the peasants. For the peasants the parish assembly was not a purely representative feudal public sphere in Habermas’s sense. Their aspirations, often visible as tough resistance and intractability in the minutes, reveal a perception of society permeated by communalism. The need for unity and for decisions that were felt to be in the interests of the common good is a noticeable feature.

In the second half of the eighteenth century, the peasants show a greater willingness to take up conflict and articulate their views vis-à-vis other, more feudal or absolutist claims to the local public sphere. This tendency is particularly clear in parishes where freehold peasants were in the majority. The members of the parish assembly, the peasants, take more and more initiatives and organize resistance to proposals from their social betters. The intensity of the resistance can scarcely be understood as being motivated only on objective grounds – the eternal fear of new expenses. With surprising consistency, stubbornness, and success, they combated virtually all proposals, no matter how well-meant, from the clergy, the local nobility, the King in Council, the county governor, or the consistory. They fought against everything that they perceived as a threat to peasant interests and the parish assembly which they felt had the right of self-determination:

### They refused to yield their right to make decisions into the hands of delegated corporations, where the nobles were often considered obvious members; nobles could be a hopeless minority in the parish assembly, but on special boards and committees their authority and eloquence could more easily make an impact.

### They declined a generous donation from a large estate owner, although it would have been enough to cover the costs of poor relief, evidently because they did not want parish self-government to become dependent on the estate; the peasants declared that they each wanted to “maintain their own wretches”.

### In the case of practical reforms which they themselves wanted, such as fire insurance funds, they strove to give them a form that suited the peasantry, rather than accepting the proposals of their superiors. Above all they said no, albeit in relatively polite terms, to a number of proposed reforms that trickled down from the King in Council via the county
administrative board, the consistory, and the clergy. These could concern anything from the establishment of orphanages, hospitals, and the training of midwives, to local agricultural societies and schools.

It is above all the hierarchical perception of the relation between the estates of society and the nobility’s claims to supremacy that were constantly questioned. The consequence was that not just the social relations were interpreted in different ways but also the religious practice. The peasants did not perceive their social role as listeners and subjects in terms of submission and obedience, as the *Hustavla* prescribed. They saw themselves in varying degrees as independent subjects, in relation both to the church and God and to their secular superiors and the state.

The functional division into the estates of society was nevertheless usually accepted. It was only in more exalted and, at least on the surface, more short-lived movements that the Utopian popular imagination rejected, or rather assumed, the ambitions of the clergy or the aristocracy.

What form do scholars think that the concept of society took in the mid-eighteenth century? Hilding Pleijel thinks that the world of the *Hustavla* – the doctrine of the three estates: those who pray, those who fight, and those who work – was a “self-evident precondition” for the way people thought, at least from the seventeenth century until the mid-nineteenth century. The medieval doctrine of the three estates was reintroduced by the clergy and was everywhere a natural part of Lutheranism. The world of the *Hustavla*, in this view, was thus a religious programme for society and a mentality. How long the mentality persisted depended on how fast the winds of change blew in a locality. The *laga skifte* enclosures and the railway, as well as proletarianization and industrialization, brought new conditions, according to Pleijel, and the world of the *Hustavla* disintegrated.

Each of the functionally defined estates – the spiritual estate, the temporal rulers, and the common people – consisted of both high and low members. The estates to which people belonged were not identical with the four privileged estates represented in the diet. Thus even the nobility were among the “low” in the spiritual estate, as listeners in the congregation. The clergy as the “low” in the political estate were subjects in a secular sense and had to follow the law; all three (or four) estates participated in the legislative process, and so on. Each had its set function in the body politic. The “high” had to lead and govern – gently but firmly – the obedient and subordinate “low” in each estate. These high people coincide in large measure with the nobility and the clergy, but the peasants were also leaders in their own estate. As the head of the household, a peasant had the same function as the lords in the large body politic. Such shifts of meaning and semantic blends give the concept its political potential.

Pleijel’s thesis has been criticized from several angles. Some scholars have drawn attention to the hierarchical feature and claimed that the reactivation of the doctrine of the three estates in the seventeenth century was part of a deliberate offensive by the church and the nobility to dominate the peasants. In this tradition, the *Hustavla* as a project of the authorities could be seen as a renewal of the techniques of power. In seventeenth-century society it was no longer possible to discipline with repressive measures alone; society and the
goals that had to be achieved were too complex for that. The crux is whether this project encountered opposing views and, if so, how effective it was.

Others claim, as I do here, that it is likely that the Hustavla was always challenged by a popular principle for the organization of society which can be called communalism. Out of the mutual dependence of the peasants there grew a view of society where relative equality and the common good became important principles for the organization of society. Views differ as to how far the Hustavla succeeded in becoming something of a mentality after the church’s intensive educational offensive from the seventeenth century onwards. It is clear, however, that the peasants’ political and judicial capacity gave them a negotiating position which made all talk of mutuality in the relations more than just empty words.52

It seems, then, that we can discern in research one meaning of the concept of society under orthodoxy if we study the normative evidence, and one partly different meaning if we study practice. To start with, it has been seen as a question of implementation, but it can also be interpreted as rival views of society exacerbating the difficulties encountered by the authorities attempting to discipline and educate the subjects. The question whether the concept of society in pre-capitalist Sweden can best be captured in the concepts of the Hustavla or communalism or a combination of the two depends partly on the research strategy and the choice of method.

It was not just the peasants’ aspirations for autonomy and the place for peasant interests that characterized the communal public sphere. The sphere of competence expanded, that is, the sphere of public discourse and the right to make decisions about matters that were perceived as of common concern expanded to include more secularized communal issues, while the proportion of church matters shrank. The state at this time, however, rarely wished to introduce laws which would make far-reaching agrarian reforms compulsory. An outright command economy lacked advocates both centrally and locally. It is obvious that both the state and the peasants largely left economic matters on the one hand to the political decision-makers on the national level, where the peasants had increasingly shaped their estate in the diet into a “class party” for the freeholders, and on the other hand, at least in places, to the formal village corporations which the state encouraged – to the extent that peasant households were subjected to formal, collective decision-making processes at all. Compulsion was reserved above all for matters concerning the supply of resources: domestic help, forestry, and enclosures. The work was only to a small extent accessible through local politics. The national political balance of power was given the form of law and then seen as judicial relations in so far as they could not be resolved on a free customary or contractual basis.

The form of the local political discourse is interesting, however. As I have already said, the peasants were becoming increasingly articulate – not infrequently in writing, with the signatures of all the participants – and demanding to be treated as equals. In the general discourse of the eighteenth century, the ideology of the Hustavla, this was not possible. For this reason the claims of the peasantry were regarded as lack of order, unreasonable final, self-interest, and so on. The minutes show with growing clarity, however, that there were proper negotiations, perhaps adjourned a few times, new alternatives were developed, and matters were gradually brought to a compromise that could be accepted by everyone. In other cases the issues came to nothing. There was a great reluctance to let a matter be decided by a vote
and a majority decision. In a relatively egalitarian local community, the victory that could be achieved in this divisive way was often illusory. Decisions of this kind could easily be sabotaged in numerous ways and seldom led to lasting results.

The freeholders’ development of a political self-awareness, a class consciousness as proprietors, farmers (hemmansägare), led them to defend a new perception of society which gave them a more equal position as landowners, on the same premisses as other propertyed people. In several areas and contexts, the peasants, especially the freeholders (skattebönder), had pursued a relatively successful struggle for improved economic and political conditions: their fiscal status was gradually extended and specified as modern, individual right of ownership, in principle enjoying the same rights to their land as the nobility to theirs. A successful struggle for unchanged taxes meant in reality a reduction in taxes as a result of inflation. Legislation directed against the lower classes more often put the peasants in the same favoured position as their superiors. In the Age of Liberty, the peasant estate were increasingly able to realize their political interests as freeholders in the diet.

Local self-government took on more and more features of a bourgeois public sphere, although the goals of the peasants were largely traditional, non-capitalist. In my doctoral dissertation I used the term bourgeois communalism to describe the view of society that set its stamp on the peasants’ view of shared space, their societal discourse.

It is thus reasonable, after this analysis, not just to regard the use of the concept of society in the Age of Liberty as a voluntary union of people assembled for the common good, as an intellectual tradition imported during the Enlightenment. A similar view emerged out of the peasants’ aspirations to become proprietors. The class aspect of these aspirations makes it possible, however, to deepen the analysis of ideas and show that the libertarian element of the project was also directed against other groups and their rival aspirations. The same concept, conceived in the discourse of the Enlightenment, took on variant forms which meant that it could be used by peasants, political economists, and reform-minded lords alike. The common features, as well as the differences, constituted its usability and the dynamic stuff of every concept that was central for people’s world-views.

What then did communal society look like in the nineteenth century, when the history of ideas shows the concept of society to be charged with state idealism and a liberal interpretation of the communal project? The social historical process which set its stamp already at the close of the eighteenth century and which dominated the social debate during the first half of the nineteenth century, also set its stamp on local self-government: proletarianization, the growing number of unpropertyed people who accounted for almost the whole population growth from 1750 to 1850, and the effects of this are the thread which we shall now follow through history.

The clearly infected relation between peasants and persons of rank which we find both in the diet and in the parish assembly at the end of the eighteenth century was largely transformed into an alliance of all landowners, whose greatest common social and political problem was the ever growing horde of landless people. How was this problem to be solved, how was peace to be guaranteed in society when traditional bonds were threatened by increasingly mobile labour and a clearer stratification of the peasantry, at the same time that the collective integrative force of religion was declining? The poor belonged to the local
community by virtue of their origin and Christianity: they were the children of peasants and belonged to the congregation. They did not belong, however, to society in political or social terms because they lacked the possibility of fulfilling economic obligations at the parish assembly and they lacked the right to enjoy the increasingly individualized economic benefits at the village level. They were thus not citizens in a political-economic sense, but they still belonged to a locally defined Christian community.

There were in principle three attitudes to this major social issue:

1. One could try to limit the number of “the rightful poor”, that is, those for whom one was responsible. Those included in this group were mainly people from the parish who were incapable of working and who had no relatives. Those who did not fall into this group had to have their mobility restricted, first with communally, locally, and regionally instigated legislation. From 1788 until at least 1847 there was also a royal sanction to say that this was right and just.

2. The rightful poor had to accept a greater regulation of their lives. The commune, whether under the leadership of the vicar or through the parish board which could very well be chaired by a peasant, could intervene in family matters, dealing with vices such as disorder and drunkenness wherever they reared their heads, but such actions were mostly taken against the unpropertied. Schooling was important for the children of this group in particular. One had to ensure that they were taught the right norms and Christian behaviour.

3. Poor relief nevertheless assumed responsibility for the maintenance of the poor. This could be done in a multitude of ways. The less common methods included the cruel forms by which paupers were “auctioned off” into the care of those who undertook to do it for the lowest cost, or the system by which paupers moved from farm to farm on a rota basis. The more common methods were support in kind or in cash, or – in the case of totally destitute people – a place in the poor-house.

A not insignificant part of communal energy and resources was expended on these questions which made new demands on society’s control not only of the poor: the newly gained ownership rights of the peasants were also curbed. Their right to sell or lease land to anyone they pleased was restricted. It was the commune as a whole which had to authorize every unpropertied person who wanted to move into the parish. A peasant himself could not decide to satisfy the need for labour on his farm by providing a place for a crofter or a cotter. The local community demanded a veto, since it would later be the community as a whole which would have to assume responsibility for the potential recipient of poor relief.

If unpropertied persons were discontented with their communal lot, they either had to find propertied persons to speak in their favour or take legal action themselves. They, like the propertied people, had the right to appeal to the county governor if they were displeased with a communal decision. This right was also used in a surprisingly large number of instances. The outcome of a number of such cases shows that it was not completely hopeless to challenge the commune’s decision in this way.

The first express use of the word “society” at the parish assembly comes in the nineteenth century. In the parish of Ålmeboda in southern Småland, where there was in general great communal activity and ambitious efforts to resolve the conflicts arising in the
wake of proletarianization, the term *samhälle* is used relatively frequently, by both the vicar and the chairman of the parish board. The meaning is fairly unambiguous: society is used to designate the existing order of proprietor dominance, which is menaced by the unpropertied, above all by those outside the parish boundaries who threaten to flood the parish with their wretched poverty, immoral way of life, and criminality. “People dangerous to society”, that is, unpropertied vagrants of various categories, had to be kept out of the parish. There were even harsher sanctions for an unpropertied person who took the liberty to move into a newly built house in the parish and “run illicit trade in Korrö in all manner of merchandise, including rum and wine, which is both unlawful and highly dangerous to the whole of society.”

The positive measures are also reflected in the use of the concept: all those who want to be accepted as craftsmen in the parish must take on one of the poor boys from the parish as an apprentice for one year without payment, “so that they can become useful members of society”.

How long did the localistic elements dominate in the communal use of the term society? There are findings to indicate that, at least as far as the towns are concerned, there was a watershed with the extension to all adult males of the right to take part in parliamentary elections and a limitation of the importance of property in the sphere of the commune in 1909. In connection with this, ideologies also penetrated the local arena and challenged the objectivity and pragmatism of communal politics. At the same time, more and more of the problems of (local) society became the problems of the state or the nation, with the triumph of integrationism in national politics. The term society no longer primarily describes a local context; it stands for the more abstract whole that is Sweden and its people.

I showed earlier how little the state suggestions to the parish assembly led to any results. This was changed to some extent in the nineteenth century, not in the sense that legislation was slavishly followed, but that the state followed up its decisions about elementary school and poor relief with some energy in the 1840s, and that much of the legislation was in phase with the needs of freehold peasants and other landowners, perhaps not as individuals – where there could be considerable variations – but as a class.

If we put this picture in relation both to the more Utopian and idealistic concept of society and to the role of the commune in the liberal project, we quickly discover rather large differences. It is perhaps not surprising that this is true in the case of the first relation; the ambitions were so high-flown and idealistic that an assembled congregation of peasants in Älmeboda or Bergunda is scarcely what Geijer or Hegel had in mind. But perhaps we can find examples of the opposite: that the peasants saw the commune as a Utopian project, although of a different kind. Listen to the following voice, that of a peasant for the first time taking the chair in the newly founded parish board in Älmeboda in the 1840s:

> When the parish assembly was held last May, the question arose of a new chairman in the place of the departed one, and contrary to expectation the Dean proposed me, and those present supported his proposal, although I the undersigned, aware of my meagre ability and incompetence to discharge this highly responsible duty, vigorously combated the election. I was informed by the Dean about royal statutes on the matter, after which I bowed to the will of the Dean and my fellow parishioners and accepted election and undertook this position of confidence.
But alas, where shall I find the power and the wisdom to manage this difficult assignment with reason and justice; so that the criminal will be brought to his rightful chastisement and the innocently accused person will enjoy paternal care and brotherly protection in our treatment of the case, for which we humbly pray to God for wisdom and understanding for me; and for you my fellow brothers we want to ask for your good advice and conscientious decisions, that you may be my faithful counsellors, which I have all the more reason to expect, in that some of you have had the honour and pleasure, like me, of being educated in the care of our first chairman, where both knowledge of juridical matters and the powers to show the right feeling, always combined with good will, were the aim of your obligations.

With a sincere recognition of my inability to manage the task which I have assumed, I give you, my friends and brethren, my first welcome today, when we meet in this room for the first time.57

The feigned modesty and self-denial shown by the evidently satisfied peasant are clear. Samuel Nilsson addresses the other members as brethren and thus emphasizes their equality with him. He proclaims his inferiority to his predecessor, an aristocrat and a captain, but at the same time he wants, with the aid of the board, to try to be a worthy successor to the military officer Fischerström, who had resigned the post.

The board thus sees itself as altruistic, working in the service of the public. Reluctantly, out of a sense of civic duty, the chairman answers the heavy call of administrating justice without regard for person. It is a big, almost mind-boggling prospect, when a peasant takes this step upwards, elected by his brethren, and then presides over them and interprets “the general good”, maintaining this by persuasion, or by using the societal violence which the board is able to exert.

No, it seems difficult to find a process “from below” which corresponds to the integrationism of the state idealists. If integrationism exists in the everyday life of the peasants, it is the more practical assumption of responsibility and the control of the poor which actually, in a well-balanced proportion of coercion and care, maintains the relative peace that prevailed in society in most of Sweden, even in these very hard times.

On the other hand, it is easier to understand why the liberal bourgeoisie seized on parish self-government when they wanted to find a vision of an alternative to the state as the solution of society’s great problems. The examples here show that their Utopia was perhaps not pure idealistic invention, as has sometimes been maintained. They had before their eyes examples of how a non-state organization of society could be. The problem for them should really rather have been that at this time the state’s communal policy was in phase with the communes’ societal policy to a degree that had never been the case before. Rarely had there ever before been so many sections of the law which the peasantry at or outside the parish assembly found useful in local politics as well. Taken together, this was perhaps a more important integrative figure than both Geijer’s and Waern’s visions of society and the communes could ever be!

On the other hand, it cannot be said that the liberal view of, for example, poor relief directly caught on or had its equivalent at the parish assembly. The local community as a territorial, social, and cultural whole – despite serious threats – was still too much of a reality
for that. Poor relief was seen in the first half of the nineteenth century as neither an entirely private nor a wholly public concern. It was somewhere in between, like the communal arena as a whole. In liberal thought, the commune was placed entirely in the private sphere: individuals cooperating to carry out certain duties. This view can possibly provide a framework for the collaborative projects between members which were also organized at the parish assembly, but it cannot create enough legitimacy for the extensive commitments they had to the unpropertied. What the poor received was above all judicial rhetoric, but under this, as a basis for the assumption of responsibility and the effort that was expended, there was a more developed but reluctantly recognized view of the social affiliation of the poor. The popular conception was probably that poor relief grew out of a social, historical, and traditional responsibility which cannot be reduced merely to private responsibility or religious mercy. The actual forms for handling the social question vary considerably, but it was “solved” everywhere in one or other sense by joint decisions. In juridical terms, we would perhaps say that customary law made poor relief incumbent on the commune, regardless of the state’s poor-relief legislation.

To sum up, the study of communal practice has yielded the following results:

I. The orthodox perception of society, characterized by hierarchical and organic metaphors, is challenged all the time by a more egalitarian view growing out of the practice of the peasantry and manifested in their idea of the self-government of the local community.

II. From the mid-eighteenth century, an articulated libertarian view makes itself felt in local self-government, directed against both the influence of the nobility and the state’s ambitions for rural reform. This perception of society, however, is not outright individualistic or anti-religious. The combination has been named bourgeois communalism. Freehold peasants increasingly become the leading stratum in local politics.

III. The commune is in large measure the body politic, and the propertied people its core. Proletarianization is the great challenge. The unpropertied are in principle and in a political sense excluded, transformed into a threat to society. In practice they are integrated by means of several different strategies: judicial, economic, etc. The commune in the mid-nineteenth century is a sort of synthesis of conservative organic Utopias and liberal dreams of freedom, although the dependence of ideas could be reversed with as much right! Anyone could turn to the commune for examples to illustrate his own political ideals.

IV-V. What happens to the local and communal concept of society during the twentieth century? We know very little about this when it comes to the countryside. And that is where a majority of Swedes lived until the Second World War.58

V

To conclude, it is possible that the distinction between Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft can help us to see the features that remained constant through all the changes. It seems clear
that the concept of society, when it is expressly used, reveals the new attempts to create coherence and social relations. “Society” becomes part of the modern project: voluntariness, individual participation in broader contexts, and elements of a bourgeois public sphere are noticeable. The reverse of the concept can be seen in the firm bonds, the traditional stability, corporativism, and collectivism in the old regime, rather than in, for example, the concepts of state or nature. At the same time, there is a palpable lack of the old Gemeinschaft as reconstructed by bourgeois thought. A strain of Utopianism, of varying strength, influences the concept of society, which tries in the nineteenth century to hold together the atomizing libertarian tendencies and the need for a “home”, topophilia, in the concept. The motive force is the will to bridge the opposition between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft as forms of organization. The integration of state and society starts already in the heyday of “liberal” thought.

In Sweden after 1900, the integrative element takes over completely from the libertarian element, until criticism of the state in the 1980s affects the concept of society and we once again witness attempts to recreate something of the eighteenth-century dynamism in the concept by emphasizing that the concept of society belongs to Gesellschaft.

My essay shows that different methods for studying conceptual history not only shed different light on the same topic, in this case the concept of society in Sweden. The differences that emerge with the use of different methods have been striking within this general framework and developmental tendency.

Traditional analysis of ideas is based on the printed word or normative statements at a high level in society. The consensus and debate of learned culture give a picture of the meaning and change of a concept. At first sight there may appear to be great advantages with this method: the more articulate meaning that emerges makes analysis easier and encompasses the entire area where the language is read and spoken.

The other method used here is to try to analyse the meaning of the concept of society in practice, in a much more limited area in both semantic and regional terms. The disadvantages are obvious: the articulation is weaker, and the scope is obviously limited. The advantages are greater contextual exactitude and also greater realization of the obvious risks of hastily generalizing the findings.

I hope I have shown how fruitful it can be to combine the two methods. An analysis of the concept of society at all chosen points in time gives results that differ to some extent depending on the method that is adopted. It is often possible, although it has only been possible to hint at this here, to associate the different meanings of the term to the perception of society by different groups. This can in turn reflect hegemonic political culture or represent a project in a more or less explicit conflict with the prevailing order. My findings suggest that the local discourse and practices contains just as much society-creating power as the discourse of national politics, at least when it comes to local politics. More general conclusions about “whose” project is most important for what “really” happened will have to wait, but they remain as a major synthesizing goal for research into conceptual history.59

Reinhard Koselleck thinks that absolutism prevented the Enlightenment on the continent from being politicized in a pragmatic way. Instead the social critique of the Enlightenment developed a Utopian vein which had no contact with everyday realism. In the
long run, it has been shown that this can easily turn into totalitarian claims – a polarized political culture emerges.\textsuperscript{60} Sweden’s political culture was on the surface, on the parliamentary level, “absolutist” for just as long as in many other countries in Europe, but its content was heavily influenced by a communalist political culture that acted as a counterweight. This permitted a different development of the heritage of the Enlightenment: a low Utopian level and pragmatic realism were combined in negotiating social institutions to which unusually broad strata of the population had access. Development towards “integrationism” in a wide sense began in Sweden long before organized capitalism and the Social Democrats’ rise to power with the establishment of the Swedish Model. Perhaps it will prove to be more resilient than we thought at the end of the 1980s, the time of elevated expectations of the Utopia of the market economy.\textsuperscript{61}


I thank the participants in Eva Österberg’s seminar at the Department of History, Lund University, for their stimulating and critical viewpoints. I also thank Britt Liljewall, Gothenburg, and Lars Edgren, Lund, for important comments. I have been able to incorporate only some of them in this paper. The rest have been kept for future use. Alan Crozier has successfully defeated the difficulties necessarily inherent in translating a text on conceptual history.

Disa Håstad in *Dagens Nyheter*, 11 April 1983, p. 5, col. 2. SAOBA (cited from the archive of *SAOB* (the Swedish Academy’s dictionary), Lund University Library.

Jan Wiklund in *Dagens Nyheter*, 16 April 1983. SAOBA.


In *Svenska Dagbladet*, 5 October 1990, p. 10. SAOBA.


“Samhälle, Borgerligt samhälle, Stat, förening av människor, som leva tillsammans under en gemensam regering eller styrelse och med gemensamma lagar.” A F Dalin, *Svenska språkets synonymer* (Stockholm, 1870), s 226 och i 3:e upplagan 1925, s 224. SAOBA.

1800-talets Norden, Stadshistoriska Institutet, Studier i stads- och kommunalhistoria 2 (Stockholm, 1987).


Surveys in Kilander, op.cit., and Jansson op.cit. The concept of liberal is used here in a general sense and uncritically when paraphrasing earlier research. The term contains complications, both for describing the ideological development in the first half of the nineteenth century and for the virtually unbroken expansion of the state apparatus, the “night—night—watchman state”, throughout the nineteenth century, at least in budgetary terms. Jörgen Kyle, “Formeringen av ett Liberalt Samfund: Statsmakt och samhällsorganisation i Sverige 1810–70”, Historisk Tidskrift 1989:3.

The variations are legion: for example, there is a tradition of regarding state interventionism in the old unitary state as so extreme that even the household can be viewed as part of the ideological “state apparatus”. See, for example, Lars Petterson, Frihet, jämlikhet, egendom och Bentham: Uteckningslinjer i svensk folkundervisning mellan feodalism och kapitalism, 1809–1860, Studia Historica Upsaliensia 168 (diss. Uppsala, 1992). Others, including myself, emphasize the relative independence of the household and the state’s difficulty in penetrating deep into the local community. On the other hand, modern times can be presented as the centuries of the homeless, fragmented individuals, while others emphasize the powerful integrative force of an increasingly globalized and public media and cultural commercialism.

A classic definition of society based on the concept of social action is found in Max Weber, Ekonomi och samhälle, part 1 (Argos, 1983), p. 3 and passim. For a more recent discussion see, for example, Olof Petersson, Metaforernas makt (Stockholm, 1989), chapters 3 and 5.

Hilding Pleijel, Från hustavlans tid (Stockholm, 1951); Peter Englund, Det hotade huset: Adliga föreställningar om samhället under stormaktstiden (diss. Uppsala, 1989).


Ingen äger frihet at något af de i detta samhällets intagne Hemman från denna inrättning undan draga.” R G Modèe, Utdrag ur första af utomme publique handlingar ... (Stockholm, 1755), p. 3686. SAOBA.

“Med Samhälle menar man egentligen den emellan flera människor, till gemensam säkerhet och beqvämlighet, genom öfverenskommelse ingångna förening, hvilken styrka består i utöfning af dess Ledamöters förenande krafter till vinnande af Samhällets ändamål. I denna bemärkelse är Samhälle skildt ifrån Samfund.” D Boëthius, Utkast till föreläsningar i den naturliga sedoläran (Upsala, 1782), s 146. SAOBA. Swedish samfund means ‘society’ in the sense of an association or fellowship, such as an academy or a church communion. The oldest meaning is the religious one. It’s more libertarian development in the nineteenth century is taking place parallel to that of society, but still with more connotations to either 'natural' or religious bonds or used as a more solemn name for instance for a leaned society e g. SAOB. Note that the related samfund and samfunn are the normal term for society in general in Danish and Norwegian. A historical comparison would be of great interest.

“Med Borgerligt Samhälle förstår jag icke blott det lefnads sätt, til hvilket de, som sig uti nogen Stad nedsatt, sig förbundit, i hwilket afseende Borgerliga sammanlefnaden sättes emot Landmann
Lefnaden, utan menar jag därmed båge desse lefnadssätt eller en Menighet, som med samfälte krafer bidrager til inbördes wälstånd.” A. Berch, Inledning til almänna hushålningen (Stockholm, 1747), p. 24. SAOBA. In full agreement with this, a company, such as an ironworks, can be described as a society, although this is not normal. There is an example of this use in a statute from 1746: “Then instruction, som för Uddeholms samhället i gemen . . . kan nödigt pröfwas at författas til samhällets nytta och fromma” (The instructions which for the society of Uddeholm in general . . . one can needfully try to compose for the utility and benefit of the society). JA Almquist, Bergskollegium och bergslagsstaterna 1637 - 1857 (Stockholm, 1909). SAOBA.

It is no chance that the six-page pamphlet contains the word samhälle nine times. Peter Forsskål, Tankar om Borgerliga Friheten, reissue with an afterword by Teddy Brunius (Stockholm, 1984).

Koselleck op cit; Habermas op cit. A more recent research in James Van Hom Melton, "The emergence of 'society' in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Germany", Language, History and Class, ed Penelope J Corfield (Blackwell, 1991)

"fast förtroende emellan Konung, Råd och Ständer, såsom den angelägnaste delen, hwarpå Rikets och Samhäldets bestånd och säkerhet beror.” Modée 1752, part 5, p. 3209; cf. Modée 1755, part 6, p. 4424; C Brunkman, Förberedelse til en Svensk Grammatica (Stockholm, 1767), p. 72. SAOBA.

"Vi har hittills nyttjat ordet samhälle än i sin allmänna, än i sin egentligare betydelse. I den sednare utmärker det företrädesvis det borgerliga samhället eller staten; i den förra omfattar det allt slags både naturlig och frivillig gemenskap mellan människor.” E G Geijer, Samlade skrifter, part I:4 (Stockholm, 1839), p 378. SAOBA.

"det osynliga, eviga samhället, som aldrig på jorden såsom enskild stat kan finnas, och medlemmar deruti äro blott de människor af alla nationer som helt och hållet upphöjda öfver enskilda afsigter, blott verka och lefva för idéer, för menneskhedens högsta mål, och således i sann mening äro verldsborgare.” E G Geijer, Samlade skrifter (Stockholm, 1811), part I:5, pp 158 and 164 (quotation). SAOBA.

"är till icke för hvarje medborgares enskilda ändamål, utan för allas gemensamma.” C A Agardh Samlade skrifter af blandadt innehåll, part 2 (1837) (Lund, 1863), p 114; cf. C J Boström, Skrifter, part 1-3 (Upsala, Stockholm, 1883-1901), part 3, p 88, on society as a whole, as a “moral personality” from which one cannot secede; SAOBA.

"Menniskan är sjelf det minsta samhället, och har inom sig en mångfaldighet och stridighet som det är hennes uppgift att bringa i överensstämmelse. Samhället åter erbjuder samma menskliga förhållanden i större mått, är sjelft det större mänskliga väsendet.” E G Geijer, Samlade skrifter, part 5, s 256. SAOBA.

Quotation from Syneprotokoll 1734 in Växjö domkapitels arkiv, FIII:7. There is a similar sense, with the specification that it refers to undivided outlands in court records from 1706, Växjö domkapitels akter 1706:281. But the word does not just refer to traditional community among peasants: “hvad interesse de hafva communt med Ridderskapet och Adeln” (what interest they [the peasants] have in common
with the gentry and the nobility), *Sveriges ridderskaps och adels riksdagsprotokoll*, part 3, p 157 (1723) (Stockholm, 1875), and “I öfrigt har kyrkan flere böcker comuna med Qvenneberga” (Otherwise the church [Hjortsberga] has several books in common with Qvenneberga), Växjö domkapitels akter 1790:329. All citations from SAOBA.

“[Konungarne i Europa sågo] från början i hvarje fri kommun, i hvarje stadsförbund, som löst sig ur feodal-afhängighetens band, med tillfredsställelse omedelbar undersåtar.” *Samlade skrifter*, del I, s 82 (1818) and part 4, p 378: “Kommunen, i sitt enkla upphof en förening emellan nägränsande oafhängiga hushåll till gemensam fred och säkerhet, har ingen naturlig myndighet att förutsätta, utan måste upprätta en myndighet genom överenskommelse.” Cf. however J W Snellman, who expresses idealism more clearly: “Det ömsesidiga erkännandet af en sådan Medborgares Rätt hos en Totalitet af individer utgör Communen” (The mutual recognition of such a civil right [the right to honour, civil confidence] in a totality of individuals makes up the commune”, *Philosophisk elementar-curs*, del III (Helsingfors, 1840), s 90, and continues in *Läran om staten* (Stockholm, 1842), p. 77, “kommunen . . . utgör en övergångsform från medborgerliga samhället till stater, från sedligheten såsom laglydnad till sedligheten såsom lefvande nationalande” (the commune . . . constitutes a transitional form from civil society to states, from morality as obedience to morality as a living national spirit). SAOBA.

30 “Comunerna på landet, eller häraderna, under gången af samhällets utveckling, förlorat sin rätt, att välja och till Monarkens utnämning presentera sina Domare.” J J Nordström, *Bidrag till den svenska samhällsförfattningens historia*, part I (Helsingfors, 1839), s 341. SAOBA.

31 “två eller flera socknar kunde bilda en kommun.” “sjelfverksamhet för gemensamma angelägenheter är den tilldelad.”, *Bihang till samtliga riks-ståndens protokoll 1810-1866* (1859-60), i, 1:Bet Kommunalstyrelse X “Hvarje socken på landet utgör för sig en särskild kommun, vars medlemmar äga att sjelve . . . vårda sina gemensamma ordnings- och hushållnings angelägenheter.” *SFS* 1862:13, p. 2. SAOBA.

32 School districts are called communes in *Bidrag till riksdagens protokoll* 1919, no. 310, p. 42. “De egentliga kommunderna i Sverige äro landtkommunerna eller socknarna, häraderna, köpingarna, städerna och länen” (The true communes in Sweden are the rural communes or parishes, the hundreds, the market towns, the towns, and the counties), P V Körner *Politiskt Hand-lexikon* (Stockholm, 1883), p. 151. SAOBA. Cf. also the “workers’ communes” formed by the Social Democrats in the 1890s.


35 For example, E L J Tenow, *Solidar*, part III, s 131 (Stockholm, 1907). SAOBA, “Hemmet är en kommun i smått” (The home is a commune in miniature), and traditional definitions of common concerns to be looked after by a small area.


Klander, *op. cit.*, p. 70.


The debate is extensive, and the transformation is still not complete. For critical views see, for example, Margareta Norlin, “Elitism och antidemokrati i våra kommuner,” *Pockettidningen R* 1992:5.


For detailed references see Aronsson, *Bönder gör politik*. I should point out that my studies chiefly concerned rural conditions. It is very possible that the discourse and practice in the towns were closer to the national level, perhaps as an intermediate stage between the nation and the countryside.

See also Peter Aronsson, “Hustavlans Värld – en folklig mentalitet eller överhetens utopi?” (manuscript for a conference report on piety in western Sweden, to be published in 1993).

Pleijel, *op. cit.* Lennart Johansson thinks that the world of the *Hustavla* in the second half of the nineteenth century was the decisive factor delaying the breakthrough of popular movements in Kronoberg County; *Brännvin, postillor och röda fanor: Om folkrörelser, politik och gammalkyrkligt i sekelskiftets Växjö* (Växjö, 1992).

Pleijel, *op. cit.*, pp. 15ff. Women are actually described, in one of Pleijel’s few instances attesting to popular support for the *Hustavla*, as the fourth estate, the estate that clothes all the others. Pleijel (ibid., p. 33) automatically sees this as a misunderstanding due to ignorance, which is not the only conceivable interpretation.


“För samhället skadliga människor.” Älmeboda sockenstämmprotokoll, 13 May 1844 (§ 18), Vadstena landsarkiv (VLA).

“låtit upprätta hus till inflyttning . . . lärer driva i Korrö, vilket skall bestå uti en förbjuden handel av varjehanda köpmansvaror, och även däribland rom och vin, vilket är både olovligt och högst skadligt för hela samhället.” Älmeboda sockenstämmprotokoll, 21 October 1845 (§ 8), VLA. Similar examples
of this linguistic usage in the Älmeboda parish board: 5 July 1847 (§ 3), 6 June 1847 (§ 6), 12 July 1846, 21 October 1845 (§ 8).

“för att bliva nyttiga medlemmar i samhället.” Älmeboda sockenstämmoprotokoll, 21 October 1845 (§ 7).

Personal communication from Börje Björkman, Department of History, Lund University, and Växjö College, based on excerpts from election agitation in local newspapers and the Växjö municipal archives.

“Då sisttidna Maj sockenstämma förrättades uppstod fråga om en ny ordförande i den avgångnes ställe, tvärt emot all förmodan föreslog Herr Prosten mig, och de närvarande understödde hans förslag, oaktat undertecknad uti medvetande av min ringa förmåga, och oduglighet att förestå detta makt på liggande uppdrag, så att jag på dessa grunder alldeles med iwer motarbetade inrösten. Av herr prosten underrättades jag om, kungliga författningar i ämnet, varefter jag till åtlydnad för Herr Prosten och mina församlingsboar medgav invalgningen och åt tog mig detta förtroende. Men ack var skall jag finna kraft, och vishet, att med förstånd och rättvisa handhava detta nog svåra uppdrag; så att den brottslige blir befördad till sin Lagliga näanst, och den Oskyldigt tilltalade, njuter en faderlig vård och broderligt hägn uti våra handläggningar, till vilket förehavande vi genom Ödmjuk bön till Gud om vishet och förstånd för mig; samt för eder mina medbröder vilja vi bedja, att med edra goda råd och samvetsgranna beslut, bliva mina trogna rådgivare, vilket jag så mycket säkrare har anledning att vänta, oaktat alla obehagliga tankar i ämnet, som några av eder haft hänsyn till detta, och oaktat att likasom upphovsres uti vår första ordförandes sköte där både kunskap, uti juridiska saker, och krafter att med rätt känsla, alltid förenad med god vilja utgjorde föremålet för edra åtlydnad.

“Ja med uppriktig erkännsla av min oförmögenhet att förestå detta ätagna förtroende hälsar jag eder mina vänner och bröder den första välkommens hälsning i dag, då vi för första gången sammantänd på detta rum.”

Aronsson, Bönder gör politik, pp. 227ff.

My own research project is called Det lokala självstyret under det demokratiska och industriella genombrottet (“Local Self-Government under the Democratic and Industrial Breakthrough”, unpublished application for project funding submitted to the Council for Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences). The project will probably be able to contribute to the discussion. The same applies to Kjell Östberg’s project, soon nearing completion at the Department of History, Stockholm University, on communal political integration in the first decades of the twentieth century.

As I understand it, my approach is in line with Begriffsgeschichte in the sense used by Reinhard Koselleck. See the favourably disposed introduction by Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh, “Historikerna och språket: teoretiska ambitioner och praktiska begränsningar. En taktisk programförläggning”, Historisk Tidskrift 1990:3.


Aronsson, “Swedish Rural Society and Political Culture”. Cf. also the observations by Zaremba, op. cit.