



CHARLOTTA WOLFF

Noble conceptions of politics
in eighteenth-century Sweden
(ca 1740–1790)

Studia Fennica
Historica 15

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Charlotta Wolff

Introduction

This book is a study on political identity, loyalties and belonging in eighteenth-century Sweden. It deals with how political communities were formed and kept together by common practices of discourse, certain key concepts and common rhetorical arsenals. The study concentrates on the nobility, whose ambiguous relationship to monarchy and republicanism put its heavy mark on the era known as the Age of Liberty (1719–1772).

In Old Regime Europe, the nobility was part of the elite that retained political power in societies and regimes founded on a traditional social order with privileged estates and constituted bodies as intermediary powers between the rulers and the mass of subjects. During the eighteenth century, in Western and Northern Europe, the legitimacy of power through privilege was falling apart. This was partly due to the writings of radical thinkers attacking the very idea of noble privilege or wishing to extend the political influence of the third estate, and partly to the attempts made by the monarchical states since the fifteenth century to unify their administration, improve taxation and thus strengthen their central authority over the societies they ruled. Rival powers that were dismantled or diminished in the name of the *raison d'État* included local assemblies, estates and other “sovereign bodies in the state”.¹

A model for this development was the France of Louis XIV (1638–1715).² With the help of *homines novi* such as Colbert, the son of a merchant at Reims, Louis XIV had concentrated the aristocracy in the court, strengthened royal jurisdiction and broken the privilege of inheritance in civil and military offices by the creation of new officers directly subordinated to the government. Domesticated at the court and occupied with the attendance of the king and with various pleasures and festivities, the higher nobility was no longer in a position to raise an armed rebellion against the monarchy as it had done during the early years of the king’s reign.³

1 Hagen Schulze, *Staat und Nation in der europäischen Geschichte*, München, 1994. See also Robert Mandrou, *L’Europe « absolutiste ». Raison et raison d’État 1649–1775*, Paris, 1977.

2 The concept of model in this context is borrowed from Mandrou, *L’Europe « absolutiste »*.

3 Arlette Jouanna, *Le devoir de révolte. La noblesse française et la gestation de l’État moderne, 1559–1661*, Paris, 1989, pp. 390–399.

Noble opposition, however, did not disappear. During the eighteenth century, particularly its second half, the nobility resurged as a challenger to the French monarchical state. At the same time, the legitimacy of its very existence was strongly questioned by enlightenment philosophers and by the rising third estate. In France, immediately after the death of Louis XIV and during the regency of Philippe d'Orléans, the aristocracy formed by the high nobility, the highest court officials and civil servants, and especially the *parlements* (courts of appeals) and other sovereign courts of justice started looking for opportunities to restore its power. It formed a strong opposition during the whole reign of Louis XV (1715–1774) and partly satisfied its ambitions under Louis XVI (1774–1792), after the king, in an attempt to appease the growing opposition, restored the *parlements* that his predecessor had abolished. The liberal part of the court aristocracy eventually took part in the outbreak of the revolution and the outlining of an ephemeral new constitutional monarchy.

The classical absolutist rule of the Sun King begot many emulators among the crowned heads of Europe. In contrast, the opposition of the French *parlements* had an influence on how politics were perceived all over Europe. Their *remonstrances* (objections to laws made by the king) were printed and spread, and the struggle between the French king and his magistrates was reported in journals and gazettes read at every court, which thus influenced noble self-image. In a sense, noble opposition and the most subtle forms of it – including metaphorical rhetoric, libels and clandestine calumny pamphlets – had become part of the dynamics of court society all over Europe.⁴

Among the northern imitators of the French model was the prince elector Frederick William of Brandenburg, the *grosse Kurfürst* (1640–1688), who started to reduce the power of the nobility by making himself financially and politically independent of the Estates of Brandenburg, convened for the last time in 1654. He also began the work on a rational bureaucracy with the creation of a General War Commissariat.⁵ His successor, Frederick III, who proclaimed himself as the first “King in Prussia” under the name of Frederick I (1688–1713), modelled his court on the French and developed a complicated court ceremonial. The perfection of the Prussian bureaucracy was achieved under his son Frederick William I (1713–1740). Unlike his father, the Soldier-

4 On the forms of noble opposition in court society, see, for instance, Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty. Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670–1789*, Princeton, 1994; Bernard Hours, *Louis XV et sa Cour. Le roi, l'étiquette et le courtisan*, Paris, 2002; Charlotta Wolff, “Kabal och kärlek. Vänskapen som alternativ sociabilitet i 1700-talets hovsamhällen”, *Historisk Tidskrift för Finland*, vol. 89 (2004:2), pp. 85–115; Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris”, *American Historical Review*, vol. 105 (2001:1), pp. 1–35.

5 The commissar, *Komissar*, is a title borrowed from absolutist France, where it characteristically designated a revocable, specialised civil servant who had been chosen by the monarch to execute a special task described in his letter of appointment, the *commission*. By appointing *commissaires* instead of confining the same tasks to holders of regular, hereditary *offices*, the monarchy hoped to decrease the local power and corruption of its nobility.

Noble conceptions of politics in eighteenth-century Sweden (ca 1740–1790) is a study of how the Swedish nobility articulated its political ideals, self-images and loyalties during the Age of Liberty and under the rule of Gustav III. This book takes a close look at the aristocracy's understanding of a free constitution and at the nobility's complex relationship with the monarchy. Central themes are the old notion of mixed government, classical republican conceptions of liberty and patriotism, as well as noble thoughts on the rights and duties of the citizen, including the right to rebellion against an unrighteous ruler.

The study is a conceptual analysis of public and private political statements made by members of the nobility, such as Diet speeches and personal correspondence. The book contributes to the large body of research on estate-based identities and the transformation of political language in the second half of the eighteenth century by connecting Swedish political ideals and concepts to their European context.



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