

# Summaries

Sven A. Nilsson

## **Gustav II Adolf and Axel Oxenstierna An inquiry into the division of power and its alternatives**

In spring 1936 I presented to Professor Lauritz Weibull my candidate thesis called "The Instrument of Government 1634" (*1634 års regeringsform*). The thesis was published in a revised form with the same title in the first volume of *Scandia* in 1937. This brought forth immediate and sharp criticisms from Professor Nils Ahnlund, to which I replied in the second volume of the aforementioned journal that same year, "Axel Oxenstierna and the Instrument of Government 1634" (*"Axel Oxenstierna och 1634 års regeringsform"*). Since then I have often returned to this instrument of government and its role in the Swedish state system.

In this article I shall try to analyse the connection between Axel Oxenstierna's theoretical views and his practical actions. I argue he was more interested in power and influence than in the principles of the division of power, and after the death of the King in 1632, Oxenstierna tried to find some guarantee against unlimited royal power, which he obviously always tried to resist. He searched for this guarantee in the bureaucratic system that the instrument of government articulated, and the instrument under discussion was enlarged with a qualified, all-embracing chancellorship.

One can note that in the historiography, attitudes towards the division of power during the 17th century have over time shifted. Contemporary historiographers followed the more or less official Oxenstierna conception, for their part Gustavian historians of the late 18th century criticized the nobility quite sharply, and by the beginning of the 19th century Erik Gustaf Geijer tried to harmonize or reconcile the different interpretations; however, subsequently his judgement of the nobility became more and more critical, which led to a kind of *Historikerstreit* in the 1840s. Although Nils Ahnlund found different controversies between Gustav Adolf and Axel Oxenstierna in the source material, his conclusion must nonetheless be labeled as harmonic or uncontroversial.

Questions of power and influence explored here must be understood in a context specific to Sweden. That is a government with three co-existing centres of power; King, dukes and council. In his last will and testament Gustav Vasa (1523–60) decided that the king and the dukes should collaborate, but this cooperation never occurred. His elder sons Erik XIV (1560–68) and Johan III (1568–92) took no notice of their father's will, yet during the power struggle which broke out after Johan died, his Catholic son Sigismund – who was simultaneously King of Poland – had to promise in his coronation oath that he would rule the country together with his uncle Karl and the council. Although this was in accordance with the will of his grandfather, the movement towards cooperation was severely weakened during the reign of Karl IX (1598–1611), after Sigismund's supporters were finally removed for good. It therefore was quite understandable that the nobility would try to strengthen their position when Gustav Adolf ascended the throne in 1611. Axel Oxenstierna now took the lead and promoted his Althusian ideas about the division of power in opposition to the young Gustav Adolf's Lipsian monarchical ideal. This resulted in the King's having to obtain the consent of the dukes, the council and the Estates (*riksdag*) in all important matters. Oxenstierna became an active chancellor, yet Gustav Adolf, through his battlefield successes, was able to strengthen his power as king. He also listened willingly to the peasants' complaints about the nobility as well as gaining the

support of Johan Skytte, the very loyal head of the royal treasury, where no purge such as the one conducted by Oxenstierna in the chancellery had occurred.

In foreign and mercantile-financial affairs, Gustav Adolf and Axel Oxenstierna were in agreement. In building what was to become the so-called power or military state, the King took the responsibility for military reforms while the Chancellor reorganized the central and regional administration. Additionally, between 1626 and 1636, Oxenstierna was royal legate (*legat*), or His Majesty's representative, in the conquered provinces on the Continent. The Chancellor's administrative reforms were based on the principle of administrative boards (*kollegier*) which, however, meant that royal power was partly delegated. It must be underlined that this policy was not always agreed to by the King who *inter alia* argued that the courts of appeal (*hovrätter*) should not be given the right to judge in the name of the King.

Other disagreements can be seen in questions concerning donation of Crown land. The King, bishops and clergy also refused to accept the idea of a *consistorium generale*, which would have meant the introduction of noble government also in ecclesiastical affairs. Thus, because the King needed clerical support for his war propaganda, this ambition was abandoned. This tug-of-war ended in 1617 with the King's presiding over the council. When the Estates assembled that same year, Axel Oxenstierna's proposals for oaths did not refer to the accession charter, which in that respect made things very similar to the situation in Denmark where monarchs were almost always compelled to grant far-reaching concessions, which they in turn tried to minimize as soon as possible. Oxenstierna's *Riksdag* Act, presented to the same Estates, aimed at facilitating the decision-making process by giving less access to the two hereditary princes, but in his coronation oath the King had in any case to promise to rule with their consent. This was necessary because the princes, with their mother, led the opposition against the monarch. The problem was solved when, in 1618 and 1622 respectively, the dukes died.

In 1631, Count Palatine Johan Kasimir (Gustav Adolf's brother-in-law) forced his way into the system of central administrative boards created by Axel Oxenstierna. The Chancellor feared he had done so in order to obtain the same position as royal *legat* in Sweden as the former had on the Continent. After the King died in 1632 Oxenstierna feared even more that the Count sought a seat in government. 1634 witnessed the birth of Axel Oxenstierna's instrument of government, an administrative device said to be in accordance with the will of the King. However, what it in fact expresses is an oligarchic "civil servants state" (*ämbetsmannastat*) in which the central positions were to be held by the five "high officers of the state" (*riksämbetsmän*), all of whom presided over their own administrative board. Beneath them were provincial governors who became the face of the state in regional administration. In other words, a governing structure in which power was controlled from above was created, leaving no room for the kind of personal government Gustav Adolf had exercised. The structure imagined by the instrument embraced all state activities but did not regulate them. The manner in which Oxenstierna meant it to function was revealed in a council discussion some years later when he referred to the coronation oath, which had never been particularly binding. The accession charter and its conditions, the Chancellor argued, were in this circumstance out of the question. Symptomatically, Johan Kasimir and Johan Skytte were excluded from the new structure. Christina's regency, which lasted between 1632 and 1644, had severe difficulties collaborating with the council, although this problem diminished when Axel Oxenstierna returned home from the Continent in 1636 and became a member of the regency. Nonetheless, the cooperation between all social groups which the Chancellor dreamt of was instead replaced by a dismembering struggle between the Estates.

When Christina ascended the throne in 1644, she pledged to rule the country in accordance with both the royal oath sworn to by her father and the principles stipulated within the instrument of government. However, she soon showed independent tendencies in her rule; the instrument of government was never confirmed, and she did what she could to see her cousin Karl Gustav, the son of Johan Kasimir, on the throne – something

which happened after her abdication in 1654. Her manner of governing was also characterized by the way she took unilateral decisions after listening to secretaries appointed by herself from among commoners or others newly raised to the nobility. On the other hand, Oxenstierna worked consistently to strengthen the domains and privileges of the nobility, and before Karl Gustav took the throne, the former drafted a proposal for a Chancellery Act which would give the chancellor a part in all presentations to the monarch. However, Axel Oxenstierna's son Erik, who succeeded his father shortly after the Queen's abdication – and the old Chancellor's "descent into the grave" – never obtained the range of authority his father had. Ironically enough, it became Erik Oxenstierna's task to conduct the first extensive "reduction", i. e. the repossession of landed estates by the Crown, along with the withdrawal of certain privileges.

Axel Oxenstierna imagined a role for himself as prime minister similar to that exercised by Richelieu, Mazarin and the dukes of Olivarez and Buckingham. Because he and Gustav Adolf shared the same views in foreign affairs, he was able to realize this ambition for quite a long time. Yet the Chancellor simultaneously sought to circumscribe the political radius of action enjoyed by the King. He wanted to establish a royal chancellery headed by himself, which could and should be seen as the embryo of today's governments, but was not successful. However, much of what he created remains. In conclusion, it should be emphasized that Axel Oxenstierna created or reformed the immense central and regional administration which to a large extent still exists in both Sweden and Finland. Indeed, this administrative machinery has maintained much of its traditional independence – something which has at times caused rulers a lot of trouble.



Bodil E. B. Persson

## Smothered Children and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

It has no doubt occurred in all times and all cultures that a seemingly healthy child has suddenly been found dead in bed. In Christian culture this has been interpreted as showing that the child died of suffocation because the parents had smothered it. This was a punishable offence, for which the parents had to receive public absolution in church. Previous historical research has mainly considered the question of whether children were suffocated by accident or design. In recent years there has been discussion of the phenomenon of "sudden infant death syndrome" (SIDS). Paediatricians believe that the alleged smotherings were cases of SIDS that were simply interpreted differently in bygone times.

The author has studied extant burial records in the southern Swedish province of Skåne from a 15-year period in the early eighteenth century and identified 297 cases where infants are stated to have passed away beside their parents or were found dead in bed in the morning. The majority were between one and four months old (diagram 2); 49.1% were boys. Only a few cases were recorded from southern Skåne. They were more common in central and northern Skåne, but there can be great differences between parishes because only some of the priests noted the cause of death. The difference between southern and central Skåne persisted in the 1750s and 1760s, when the incidence of suffocated children in the hundreds of Frosta and Gärd was 18–19 per 1,000 baptisms, while in Ingelstad hundred it was less than 5 per 1,000.

An absolution book from the early seventeenth century from Göinge hundred in northern Skåne lists 280 cases when parents were publicly absolved in church for having smothered their children. The majority of the dead children were between one and four months old (diagram 3); 45.5% were boys. The graphs for Skåne in the early eighteenth century and Göinge in the seventeenth century have been compared with the ages of 334 children who died of SIDS in Sweden in the 1970s (diagram 4). Of these, 57.2% were boys. The graphs are very similar (diagram 5), but the differences in incidence are great. In the 1970s the incidence of SIDS in Sweden was 0.54 per 1,000 live births. We do not know the incidence of smothered children in Göinge, but it is not impossible that it may have been as high as 15–20 per 1,000 baptisms, as in Frosta in the 1750s. We also see that girls predominated in the seventeenth century whereas today it is boys.

SIDS is an exclusionary diagnosis: an evidently healthy child aged less than a year dies unexpectedly, and the post-mortem cannot find any explanation for the death, nor can an investigation of the circumstances explain what happened. In the past the priest and the parents did not always agree about what had happened. The final diagnosis was a result of a negotiation in which the parents had to give an account of how it had happened, called in witnesses to say what they knew about the child's previous health and the relation between mother and child, and the dead child was examined for bruises and bloodstains. Apart from the lack of autopsies, the procedure was not wholly dissimilar to what happens today after cases of SIDS.

It could happen that the child was discovered somewhere other than beside the parents in the bed. In some cases the child had been ill with some other ailment, but since the parents had been asleep when the child died, they could not say what had happened. They were considered negligent for not having watched over the sick child, and since smothering could not be ruled out, they were judged to be in need of public absolution. These occasional notices indicate that the parents' "crime" may have been something other than what they were officially accused of. By sleeping when the death occurred, they had broken the cultural norms dictating how a "proper" death should take place: it had to be

public. Holding a vigil with lighted candles, the living had to keep the dying person company and keep evil spirits away. The procedure with suffocated children suggests that these norms also applied to the very youngest children.

The age distribution of the children who died of SIDS is considered by paediatricians to be highly characteristic and specific. The graphs for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries look almost identical. We may therefore presume that the majority of the “smothered” children in reality died because of sudden infant death syndrome. But why have the proportions of boys and girls been reversed? And what is the reason for the great differences in incidence between Frosta and Ingelstad, or the difference between Göinge in the seventeenth century and Sweden in the 1970s? We still have to find answers to these questions.

Birgitta Odén

## **The Suicidal Precipice – Myth or Reality?**

In the “collective memory” of the treatment of old people in bygone days, the idea of the “suicidal precipice” (Swedish *ättestupa*) plays a major role: old people in pagan times were thought to have fallen to their deaths off a cliff, whether voluntarily jumping or being pushed. The article shows that the idea goes back to a jocular Icelandic saga written in the late thirteenth or the fourteenth century and imported to Sweden in the seventeenth century. The saga was spread in the eighteenth century by learned scholars, being associated with various geological formations, especially in Västergötland. In the nineteenth century the saga was included in school textbooks and works of popular scholarship, finally becoming a folk tradition which everyone had heard and which everyone believed to be true. In actual fact, there is no evidence at all that the suicidal precipice was used in reality. The article also shows that this myth has had a great impact as an argument in practical social policies. People’s need for myths must be countered by a critical attitude in historical research, so that the myths do not mislead people and damage our ethical judgement of relations between the generations.





Elin Malmer

## Vanished Oaths

### The Rationalization of Society and the Abolition of the Oath of Fealty and Oaths of Office

Up to the late 19th century religious oaths were imposed upon Swedish holders of official positions and certain professionals. The oath of fealty was a declaration of loyalty to the king and state. Fundamental to the different oaths of office was a solemn promise to faithfully perform one's duties. Officials in the civil service, clergymen in the Lutheran state church, the military, and physicians, were some among the many groups that took those oaths. The thesis examines the reasons for the abolition of the oaths. Previous Swedish research in this field is very limited.

Oaths are known in the Nordic countries from pre-Christian times. In the Swedish medieval state the oath was vital. The legal relations between a new king and his people were expressed in oaths.

On the European continent the oath was used as a spiritual-metaphysical means of compulsion in the early modern period. According to the leaders of the Reformation, the oath was a conditional self-imprecation, by which a person invoked god's vengeance on himself in the event of perjury. This doctrine existed in Sweden too. Oaths were imposed upon officials and other groups in order to uphold loyalty.

With Immanuel Kant's critique as a starting point, the oath was called into question by debaters on the continent at the beginning of the 19th century. Some debaters were hesitant about using oaths at all, while others criticized the traditional oath doctrine of the Protestant churches. Instead, swearing was seen as an expression of the oath taker's recognition of a divine justice. In the Swedish debate, the new view existed parallel with the old doctrine.

In Sweden the imposing of oaths was motivated by the teachings of the state church. When freedom of religion gradually gained ground during the 19th century the oath debate thrived. Many Baptists refused to take oaths with reference to Jesus' admonition not to swear at all.

In the 19th century oaths no longer had the same constitutive importance as in the Middle Ages. A system of rational law was developing, and the legal responsibilities of employees and professionals were not connected to the oath taking.

The parliamentary debates on the oaths in the 1870s and 1880s concerned moral and religious issues. Some critics thought that people's respect for the oath had been lost due to its excessive use. Others rejected the oaths completely, arguing that they were obsolete and useless. Some MPs argued that oaths in the form of a promise for an uncertain future were unchristian. Only god had the power to swear such oaths. The defenders for their part meant that the traditional oath still was a suitable means of upholding loyalty. They could also use the Lutheran exegesis concerning the oaths in support of their view.

Many of the MPs that criticized the oaths belonged to either of the two branches of the revivalist movement; the evangelistic movement within the state church, or the dissenter movement. Revivalism grew strong in Swedish society during the second half of the 19th century. From the 1870s onwards an increasing number of representatives of the revivalist movement were elected to the parliament.

By the mid-1890s the government had abolished the oath of fealty and oath of office for most groups. Today no religious oaths exist in Swedish legislation.

The abolition of oaths should be seen in the context of the continuous rationalization of society described by Max Weber. The reassessment of the oath during the early modern period was a sign of the increasing value rationality within Protestantism. As a more abstract concept of god developed, the idea of a conditional self-imprecation lost ground. The oath was no longer an effective means of compulsion.

The abolition of oaths can be seen as an expression of increased instrumental rationality. In a society where instrumentally rational action dominates, this kind of ritual is regarded as irrational. From an instrumentally rational standpoint oaths of office were not needed in the growing bureaucracies where all positions were rationally regulated. Swearing fealty to the king was regarded as a relic of the past.

The abolition could however also be explained with the continuing process of increased value rationality within Protestantism. The spirit of ascetic Protestantism triumphed in the Swedish debate on the oaths. The critics successfully propagated for the high standard of morality of the rationalized religion. In their view, loyalty could be demanded of employees and professional even without the taking of oaths.

Inger Hammar

## **The Problematic Public Sphere Philanthropy, Women's Vocation, and Emancipation**

Research in women's history has hitherto described the breakaway of women from the private sphere in the period 1870–1920 without any consideration of the influence that the Lutheran doctrine of vocation still exerted. The author shows how woman's way from the private to the public sphere was much more complex than what has hitherto been depicted in previous research. The complication was the doctrine of vocation, according to which women were called to serve solely in the private domain of the home, as wife and mother.

When external societal development, with increasing social destitution, required women's contributions outside the home, these were first confined to voluntary social work – philanthropy. Women were subsequently needed in contexts where decisions about matters such as municipal poor relief were made. Yet this whole development of women's participation in what we today call public space could not have happened without a breach with the traditional Lutheran vocation doctrine. Women's tasks in the field of philanthropy were regarded as an extension of the private sphere, partly because these tasks had previously belonged to the sphere of the home and the household, and partly because it was the woman's "maternal" characteristics that were utilized in these contexts. The place that the Lutheran vocation doctrine gave to men in both the political and the ecclesiastical estate was not questioned, and men did not need to feel any threat from these Christian women.

In the debate carried on between different representatives of the outlook based on the Lutheran vocation doctrine, this form of women's liberation was called the "true" emancipation. The author describes the attempts at ideological motivation both of the retention of the traditional Lutheran doctrine and of the affirmation of women's potential to work outside the strictly private sphere – work necessitated by economic development.

There was also, however, a "false" emancipation. That was when women no longer observed the distribution of roles in the Lutheran vocation doctrine but instead wanted to share responsibility with men in the public sphere. This could be done if a woman chose not to assume the role of wife and mother or if she tried to combine it with vocational work in the hitherto male-controlled public sphere. For Christian women this emancipation was made possible by the emergence of liberal theology which, with its historical understanding of biblical texts and the heritage of the Reformation, was able to relativize the significance of the vocation doctrine.

One of the women who thus championed a view of man and woman as equal in creation, with the aid of a new view of the Bible, was Lydia Wahlström – one of the pioneers of Swedish women's liberation.