Rallying for Support: The King and the Peasantry

In 1523, the young aristocrat Gustav Vasa was elected king by the estates of Sweden. His election was the result of a political insurrection against the lawful king, Christian II of Denmark. The uprising had begun with Gustav emerging as a leader of the peasantry in the province of Dalarna. But to fight the experienced troops of Christian he also received economic and military support from the rich city of Lübeck, who had strong commercial interests in Sweden.

Gustav himself was a nobleman, but his family had only weak links to previous rulers of Sweden. The legitimacy of his regime could easily be questioned. Indeed, none of his predecessors had been able to hold on to the throne for a very long time either. The normal fate of a ruler of Sweden in the late medieval period was to be disposed of by his adversaries. The traditional elites, the aristocracy and the powerful church, were much weakened after long periods of civil war. By contrast, the Swedish peasantry had emerged as a strong force, both politically and military, during the previous century. Peasant freeholders controlled almost half of the landed wealth of the realm, and the ability to tax these resources was the key to success for any aspiring monarch.

In this paper I shall address king Gustav’s propaganda directed to the peasant communities. To hold on to his throne the king needed their support, in economic as well as political matters. To achieve that he had to convince the peasants that the new regime was good for them and that support for Gustav was only in their own interest. I will show how Gustav made use of traditional values of how a good relationship between a king and his subjects ought to be established. But I will also argue that the king’s message changed during the latter part of the reign, when he began to announce his vision of a stronger kingship, indeed, of a better organized state.
Every ruler who wants the respect of his subjects must strive for legitimacy, an authority based on something other than mere violence. The English sociologist David Beetham has formulated three basic principles of legitimate rule. First, every regime that wants to exercise legitimate power must act in accordance with established rules. A ruler must also be able to justify his wielding of power with reference to a general interest, norms and values shared by both ruler and subjects. Finally, the subjects must be given a chance to express their support of, or to show their participation in, the system of power.

For Gustav Vasa the legal validity of his regime was bound to be a problem. Being a usurper, he could not claim to be the heir by birth. He tackled this by emphasizing his role as an elected monarch. According to this constitutional line of reasoning, the Swedish estates had made a binding commitment to him at the diet of Strängnäs 1523. King Gustav also claimed to rule by consent: critical decisions were regularly attributed to the king and the aristocratic council as a corporate body.

The fact that his legal right to the throne could be disputed made it more important for Gustav Vasa to stress the participation of his subjects in the new power-system. The king in essence created the riksdag, the Swedish national parliament, in 1527, to mobilize support for his attack on the landed property of the church. It was symptomatic that the estates included peasants as well as nobles and burghers.

Gustav often made references to the law of the realm and his respect for ancient and local customs. But such traditional arguments weren’t enough to win the support of the Swedish peasantry. The king also tried a more innovative approach: By constantly attacking his predecessor, Christian II, Gustav tried to prove that his own regime was the lawful one.

King Christian becomes an integral part of king Gustav propaganda ca 1540, when the Swedish king had to justify the introduction of a new tax-system. The image of the merciless tyrant, who had burnt down houses and crops leaving helpless widows and fatherless children in his wake, served to enhance the image of Gustav as the chosen one, the hero who had stood up against the tyrant for the sake of his people. The dichotomy of Gustav the freedom fighter and Christian the tyrant, developed into a narrative myth of the new regime, to be retold whenever king Gustav needed active support. The myth made Gustav into a charismatic leader, something else than only the lawful regent. The continuing impact of this propaganda
figure can be traced right up to the 21st century, and still holds a firm grip on the Swedish national consciousness.

But what about norms and values shared by both ruler and subjects? How did Gustav Vasa go about to convince the peasants that his regime would defend the general interest? His arguments can be sorted into the three basic needs that Barrington Moore JR has identified as constituents of a legitimate rule:

- military protection
- maintenance of internal peace and order
- subsistence and welfare

The claim to protect his people from foreign invasions was central throughout Gustav’s reign. The memory of almost 100 years of civil strife made protection against enemies a precious commodity. From the start, Gustav argued that it was the prerogative of the king to organize the military defence. In the past, he said, when foreign armies had ravaged the Swedish countryside, peasants had been forced defend their families and farmsteads by themselves. But since Gustav became king, he had built great warships and hired professional soldiers. Now the peasants needn’t worry about having to defend their own anymore. Instead, they could work the land in peace so that the whole kingdom could prosper.

In the early years, the king was repeatedly demanding payments for protection services rendered in the past. The military expenses were described as something extraordinary. But from ca. 1540 king Gustav came to argue for a standing army under his own command, that would guarantee the protection of the kingdom for time to come. During the period of peace that followed, the king kept insisting that the peasants must pay more taxes for their future protection. The creation of a standing army also meant pacifying the Swedish peasants. The watershed was to be the great Dacke rebellion in 1542, when the peasants of south-eastern Sweden rose against the king’s bailiffs. It took Gustav Vasa more than a year to subdue the rebels despite the aid of hired mercenary troops.

After the insurrection, the king enlisted many of the peasants who had fought in the strife into royal service. They had to swear an oath to the king, received a small sum of money, and were then allowed to return back to their farms. These local reserve troops were mustered regularly, and also received a rudimentary military training. From now on, there was more substance in
the argument that the ordinary peasant no longer had to worry about defending his property. The protection provided by the king – and his military strength - was becoming more visible at the local level.

To maintain peace and order within the kingdom was also a crucial component in Gustav’s quest for legitimacy. In the first years, the image of reciprocity was all-important. Whenever discontent arose in the provinces, the king would summon members of his council to meet the representatives of the land and hear their complaints. When the king was unable to attend he had to apologise for not being there in person. The Swedish peasants demanded a straight line to their king, and their voice had to be considered when the unity of the realm was in question.

This open policy changed during the 1530s: Meetings and negotiations were more seldom proposed, and the king’s proclamations to his subjects were filled with a much more power-conscious language. At the same time, the expanding royal organization began to play a bigger part in the king’s propaganda. The peasants were now encouraged to issue complaints against the king’s bailiffs and other local officials.

The capacity of the royal administration to intervene in local society was demonstrated in the reform of the tax system around 1540. In every province, the king’s officials co-operated with local representatives in putting together a register of the tax-base of their districts. Since medieval times, contacts between the peasants and their lords had passed through intermediates, representatives of the local communities, and the actual tax-burden had been shifted locally. Now each peasant was made personally responsible to the king for fulfilling his obligations. In the king’s point of view, this intervention of the state should guarantee a more just distribution of the tax-burden altogether. But the fact that crown revenues rose sharply in Gustav’s time might throw some doubt on the King’s words.

The great rebellion in 1542 was in effect a reaction against raised taxes and increasing central control. At first, the king responded by denouncing the rebels as “thieves-of-the-woods” and “traitors”. As the insurrection spread, Gustav was forced to use a more reconciling language. In proclamations to the rebellious districts he acknowledged that some peasants might have suffered harsh treatment from his local agents. But all such acts of violence had been committed without Gustav’s knowledge. If the peasants only had informed him of their
misery, instead of resorting to armed conflict, the king would have been able to solve the situation to the best. The peasants must trust the good will of the king, while the king’s own officials had to shoulder the responsibility for the insurrection.

This principle of peasants complaining directly to the king became all-important in the latter part of king Gustav’s reign. After the rebellion the royal administration was further strengthened. But the king kept insisting that any subject that suffered injustice might appeal to the king. As a result, decisions in the local district courts were often overruled by the king, and the local self-government became less independent. Peace and order was no longer established by the bargaining between the king and the peasant communities – it was the direct result of the intervention of the royal administration and the personal control of Gustav himself. In the propaganda of Gustav Vasa, state power was replacing the idea of a rule by consent.

The material welfare of his subjects played a less conspicuous part in the king’s propaganda, but are clearly visible in the early years. Sweden was dependent on open seaways to import necessities like salt, hops and cloth. Therefore Gustav linked the issue of material security to the problem of protection. As long as the king got the taxes to maintain a strong navy, the merchants would be able to provide the goods the people needed. Gustav also tried to regulate prizes by decree but such policies met with little success. The period before 1540 however, saw a shift towards higher ambitions in economic policy. Gustav issued a string of regulations regarding commerce, agriculture, and forestry. The state of the kingdom was to be improved by introducing better and more rational working methods.

After 1543 proclamations directed at peasant communities became more rare. Gustav’s fiscal and military organization continued to grow, and bargaining with the peasants was more often conducted at the local level, by the king’s bailiffs. The instructions issued for the bailiffs in the 1550’s bear a clear mark that king Gustav’s economic ambitions had by no means diminished. The local officials were expected to control and direct every aspect of economic life and report back to the king. More state control was still regarded as the best means to increase the prosperity of the realm. But the king more often addressed his subjects indirectly, through the administrative channels.
While protection, conflict-solving and material security were key issues in the propaganda of the King, the important subject of religion holds a surprisingly low profile. Gustav Vasa, the ruler who in effect enforced the reformation in Sweden, carefully avoided such topics when he addressed the peasants. While he was quite specific about the plans of reducing the landed wealth of bishops and chapters, all religious conflicts were delegated to representatives of the church. It seems that questions of the faith were too sensitive to be easily incorporated into the official propaganda.

What shall we make of the peasants’ role in the shaping of the new regime? And what possible effect could the propaganda of the King have had? One might think that the words would ring false when the peasants came to realise that the main object of the regime was to make them pay higher taxes? Or were they all indeed, fooled by the King’s words?

The Swedish historian Peter Reinholdsson has suggested that there was a fundamental change in the relationship between peasants and lords in 16th century Sweden. During the late Middle Ages lords and peasants had often sided together in the recurring power struggles. But in the Early Modern Period the nobility changed their liaisons and became servants of the state. The peasants were deprived of their allies, and now stood alone if they wanted to confront the growing state power. This is precisely what happened in the Dacke rebellion, where the peasants had to face a formidable alliance between the king and the nobility.

Reinholdsson attributes this transformation to Gustav Vasa’s confiscation of the Church’s landed wealth in 1527. To enforce this decision the king needed the support of the nobility, and he had to pay by offering them a share of the booty. From now on, good relations with the monarch were to be the main objective of any ambitious Swedish nobleman. But when the nobility became a servant of the state, the King in his turn had to assume the traditional role of the local lord, protecting and defending his people. The peasants had to pay their rents directly to the king, but he in return had to act as their good lord, listen to their complaints and defend their interests.

It was this vision of reciprocity that compelled Gustav Vasa to meet the peasants in political arenas, as well as ensuring their right to voice complaints over the king’s own officials. In a society with shifting loyalties, the image of the good king who dispenses justice and cares for his subjects becomes crucial. What is characteristic about the Vasa dynasty is that all regents
held on to this image, and kept the channels to the local arenas open. In a way, the new Swedish monarchy was built on dialogue.

For Gustav Vasa, the traditional ideology of law and obedience was never enough. His position compelled him to include the peasants in the political discussions of the day, and to bargain for their support with fresh arguments. For the individual peasant, a direct relationship with the king might very well have seemed more valuable than the traditional dependence on the local nobleman. In the following centuries, the peasants continually sided with royal power against the political threat of the nobility. The legacy of King Gustav rallying for support can thus be traced a long way through the history of early-modern Sweden.

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