The market and ‘the making’: the economics of the first workers’ associations in nineteenth-century Sweden

Anne Berg

To cite this article: Anne Berg (2020) The market and ‘the making’: the economics of the first workers’ associations in nineteenth-century Sweden, Social History, 45:2, 167-192, DOI: 10.1080/03071022.2020.1732127

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/03071022.2020.1732127

© 2020 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
Published online: 27 Apr 2020.
Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 353
View related articles
View Crossmark data
The market and ‘the making’: the economics of the first workers’ associations in nineteenth-century Sweden

Anne Berg
Uppsala University

ABSTRACT
The first phase of class formation in mid-nineteenth-century Sweden was characterized by its liberal stance. The first workers’ organizations in continuous operation focused on attaining political rights and representation; offered self-help, education and social and economic support; and were engaged in neither socialist agitation nor contentious politics. The middle classes and even the bourgeoisie often supported these endeavours in various ways. The aim of this article is to provide a new explanation of why this first transitional phase developed. Previous explanations of class formation have paid scant attention to the material economic conditions behind the survival and stability of workers’ organizations. I argue that the material should be brought back into the analysis of class formation to further our understanding of organized class politics. By analysing the economics and strategies of a typical liberal workers’ association in Sweden, I show that organized politics were conditioned by the market. The organization’s main source of income were commercial activities. This strategy speaks to the structural significance of commercial economic thinking. In conclusion, the first phase of working-class organizational development was profoundly conditioned by the economic structures of an industrializing social formation.

KEYWORDS
Working-class organizations; class formation; Sweden; nineteenth century; material conditions

E.P. Thompson showed in The Making of the English Working Class that the working-class presence in mid-nineteenth-century England was a political and cultural formation that owed as much to agency as to the conditioning factor of the Industrial Revolution. Over 50 years after Thompson’s book was published (and adopted and developed by generations of scholars), we know that the making and remaking of the working class was highly determined by the diverse political and economic contexts, customs and various local milieux of nineteenth-century Europe. Instrumental to this process, in almost every case, was the rise of workers’
associations, clubs and trade unions. Formal organization and an emerging consciousness of class were intimately connected.  

The first phase of class formation in Sweden was, as Eric Hobsbawm wrote, a ‘transitional phase’, corresponding to the early and uneven developments of proletarianization and industrialization. From the mid-nineteenth century to the nascent socialist and social democratic agitation of the mid-1880s, declassed artisans and craftsmen, the emerging strata of factory workers and wage-paid servants, and small producers and people from the middle class, entered into societies that appealed to them as ‘workers’. Beginning in the mid-1860s, the country saw the rise of over 100 workers’ associations that achieved some sort of continuity. These first organizations had a mix of social, political and economic goals.  

Scholars have repeatedly emphasized the liberal outlook of the first workers’ movement in Europe, and liberalism was also apparent in the Swedish case. Liberal ideas, political and moral, paired with scepticism towards the social effects of economic transformation, supplied not only a critique of the current system, but also a solution. These associations stressed every man’s natural right to political citizenship and sought to ease the harsh conditions of the working poor. They also offered education on these political subjects as well as social security, economic aid and spaces for assembly and political discussion. However, the rhetoric of these first workers’ organizations was neither socialist nor overtly antagonistic towards capitalists. (Such political language was more common in the radical press during this era.) The enemies were more often the representatives of the traditional social order of estates – the bureaucratic elites and the aristocracy.  

How can we explain this first transitional phase in the making of the Swedish working class? What were the circumstances that contributed to the rise and endurance of these liberal workers’ associations?

2R. Aminzade, Ballots and Barricades. Class formation and republican politics in France, 1830–1871 (Princeton, 1993); E.J. Hobsbawm, Worlds of Labour. Further studies in the history of labour (London, 1984), ch. 11; I. Katzenelson, ‘Working-class formation: constructing cases and comparisons’ in I. Katzenelson and A.R. Olberg (eds), Working-class Formation. Nineteenth-century patterns in Western Europe and the United States (Princeton, 1986). Scholars have discussed which measures should be used to categorize when a working-class movement was formed. The organizational criterion is one way; ideological and political action criteria have also been suggested. For a discussion of the different definitions, see Å. Abrahamsson, Ljus och frihet till näringsfång. Om tidningsväsen, arbetarrörelsen och det sociala medvetandets ekologi – exempel Stockholm 1838–1869 (Stockholm, 1990), 15–18.

3Hobsbawm, Worlds of Labour, op. cit., viii.

4B. Horgby, Egensinne och skötsamhet. Arbetarkulturen i Norrköping 1850–1940 (Stockholm, 1993), 48–9.

5P. Joyce, Visions of the People. Industrial England and the question of class, 1848–1914 (Cambridge, 1991), 15–17, 27–55, 65–84; M.C. Finn, After Chartism. Class and nation in English radical politics, 1848–1874 (Cambridge, 1993), 13–59; J. de Felipe-Redondo, ‘Society without the social: the Spanish labour movement and the rise of the social, 1840–1880’, Social History, 41, 4 (2016), 396–416; J. Vernon, Politics and the People. A study in English political culture, c. 1815–1867 (Cambridge, 1993); R. Ashcraft, ‘Liberal political theory and working-class radicalism in nineteenth-century England’, Political Theory, 21, 2 (1993), 249–72; Katzenelson, op. cit., 29.

6Abrahamsson, op. cit., 435–61; A. Berg, ‘En demokratisk revolution. De tidiga arbetarrörelsen och forandet av demokrater från 1840-tal till 1880-tal’ A. Berg, E. Larsson, M. Michaelsson, J. Westberg and A. Åkerlund (eds), Utbildningens revolutioner. Till studdet av utbildningshistorisk förändring (Uppsala, 2017), 68–9.
The most well-known explanations of the process of class formation have followed or sought to develop (or refute) Thompson’s classic account. Considering current research, decades after linguistic and cultural ‘turns’ and discussions on the valency of class, the most fruitful approach may be one that integrates the insights of both culturalists and some materialists. Still, something is missing in the explanatory power of this integrated approach, especially if we seek to understand the rise and development of collective organizations. In this article I suggest that one of the consequences of the ‘turns’ was the abrupt slowing of conceptual development regarding the material conditions of class formation. My argument is that we need to reintroduce the materialist approach and take it in a new direction to fully explain class formation and its profound connection to industrialization. One way to do that is to focus on the economic foundations of the growth and continuity of working-class organizations.

The argument is illustrated by an analysis of the material economic conditions (sources of income and economic strategies) of the Swedish Malmö New Workers’ Association (Malmö nya arbetareföreningen), from its establishment in 1872 to the 1890s. The case of Malmö illustrates the new framework for explaining the first wave of class formation and offers new insights into the relationship between organized class politics and the capitalist social formation. The key argument of the article is reflected in its title ‘The market and “the making”’, as commercial activities were the main source of income for this association. Industrialization and the marketization of labour were the conditions that made people into wage workers, but the market was also the condition that made workers’ associations persist. This dialectic speaks to the thoroughly dominant character of the capitalist mode of production into which class politics was born.

**Bringing material conditions back in**

This article can be read as a request to bring material conditions back into explaining the history of class formation. Although this request may seem superfluous, since materialist and social analyses of class never went away despite the cultural and linguistic turns, the general focus of scholarly debate and the consequences of those turns have to be laid out for my request to be properly understood. Class formation has been the topic of fundamental theoretical debates. These debates, particularly intense in the 1980s and 1990s, circulated around the concepts of social class, experience and class consciousness. Discussions concerned whether experience and political class consciousness arose through language rather than material
conditions. At the centre of debate was the influential model in Thompson’s *The Making* and the explanatory programme of ‘new social history’.  

Social historians of the 1970s and 1980s were highly influenced by both Thompson’s definition of class and modern sociological thought. Thompson defined a class as a historically and relationally formed group. While the experiences of proletarianization and marginalization caused by industrialization were determined by people’s social being (their place in production), class consciousness was not. Class consciousness was, as he stated, a cultural and political formation whose expression was influenced by the real historical context. The progeny of Thompson’s perspective used the underlying social and economic structures of society, especially people’s social location, to explain social action. A fine example of this tradition is William H. Sewell’s *Structure and Mobility*, which reconstructed the social lives of the men and women in Marseilles and demonstrated how structural changes in that urban port town were related to industrialization. Sewell analysed phenomena such as crime and politics against the background of demographic growth, changing occupational patterns and all the circumstances that influenced those people’s lives. While Sewell’s focus was on the effect of extra-Marseilles economic structures on the town, social historians – especially British Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm – began to promote society as a whole as the real object of analysis. The capitalist social formation, in the last instance structured by the material conditions and class relations created by industrialization, was propounded as the main framework for explaining the political and cultural history of the nineteenth-century working classes. Thus, the focus turned to the system itself, rather than its effect or expression in particular cities or towns, and to the effect of the system of exploitation on class relations as a whole, rather than the isolated history of one class.

Social historians shared an ontology in which social and material structures were the determining factors of human action. The scholarly project for cultural historians of the 1980s and 1990s, however, was to refute this understanding of the causal relation between the social and the political. Instead of the Marxist view of the social relations of production as the foundation of the political, the political was now seen as the primary condition of class

---

7On this debate, see e.g. H.J. Kaye and K. McClelland (eds), *E.P. Thompson. Critical perspectives* (Cambridge, 1990); K. Canning, ‘Gender and the politics of class formation: rethinking German labor history’ in G. Eley (ed.), *Society, Culture, and the State in Germany, 1870–1930* (Ann Arbor, 1996).

8For in-depth discussions about the various branches of social history and the later cultural turns, their various points of influence, or how different scholarly milieus developed in, for example, the USA and Britain, see G. Eley and K. Neild, *The Future of Class in History. What’s left of the social?* (Ann Arbor, 2007), 34–137; W.H. Sewell Jr., *The Logics of History. Social theory and social transformation* (Chicago, 2005), 22–80.

9Thompson, op. cit., 9–14. On Thompson’s influence, see Sewell Jr., *The Logics of History, op. cit.*, 26–7.

10W.H. Sewell Jr., *Structure and Mobility. The men and women of Marseille, 1820–1870* (Cambridge, 1985).

11E.J. Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour, op. cit.*, 222–5; E.J. Hobsbawm, ‘From social history to the history of society’, *Daedalus*, 100, 1 (1971), 32–8.
formation and class consciousness. This view was influenced by poststructuralist understandings of language and culture. Gareth Stedman Jones’s discussion in *Languages of Class* is a classic example of this critique. Stedman Jones argued that experience is constructed through political language, rather than the other way around. In his famous ‘Rethinking Chartism’, he related changes in the politics of class to changes in the political discourse, not to extra-political objective social determinants.\(^\text{12}\) Joan Wallach Scott’s critical appraisal of Thompson’s concept of experience is another example. Scott proposed that experience, because it was articulated in language, should be analysed as something grounded in discourse, not in material structures.\(^\text{13}\) Patrick Joyce’s correction of the ‘received wisdom’ of the interrelated history of the development of industrialization and class consciousness in Britain, mainly grounded in the works of Thompson and Hobsbawm, is yet another example of poststructuralist revisionism. In *Voices of the People*, Joyce argued that class was only one way in which working men and women imagined the social order in nineteenth-century Britain. According to him, the classical Marxist model of a developing working-class consciousness grounded in the class struggle between capital and labour was not applicable to the British case.\(^\text{14}\) There was, to summarize Joyce’s critique, no *a priori* material conditions of life, no outside reality, no determinist fundament and no laws upon which historical events such as class politics could be explained.

These cultural historians’ new appraisals were highly influential and necessary, especially the critical programme of feminist labour historians, who emphasized analysing class from the perspective of gender.\(^\text{15}\) Still, many of the attempts to do away with the social fact of class returned in the end to recognizing its importance.\(^\text{16}\) As Selina Todd has argued, social history never ‘went away’ after the turns of the 1980s and 1990s; the traditional analyses of class endured, but integrated insights from feminist and other emergent theories.\(^\text{17}\) Scholars have also made the case for an integrated approach. Geoff Eley and Keith Neild, to take an example, have argued that historians would benefit from using multiple theoretical registers to analyse inequality and its relationship to political action: both cultural and material understandings should be used to reach a comprehensible understanding of class formation.\(^\text{18}\)

\(^\text{12}\)G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class. Studies in English working class history, 1832–1982* (Cambridge, 1984), 25–75.
\(^\text{13}\)J.W. Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, 1988); J.W. Scott, ‘Experience’ in J. Butler and J.W. Scott (eds), *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York, 1992).
\(^\text{14}\)Joyce, op. cit., 1–6, 13–23.
\(^\text{15}\)See, for example, Canning, op. cit., 105–41; A. Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches. Gender and the making of the British working class* (Berkeley, 1995), 264–71.
\(^\text{16}\)See, for example, the volume edited by V.E. Bonnell, L.A. Hunt and R. Biernacki (eds), *Beyond the Cultural Turn. New directions in the study of society and culture* (Berkeley, 1999). See also the discussion in Sewell Jr., *The Logics of History*, op. cit., 77–80; and Joyce, op. cit., 329–31.
\(^\text{17}\)S. Todd, ‘Class, experience and Britain’s twentieth century’, *Social History*, 39, 4 (2014), 489–508.
\(^\text{18}\)Eley and Neild, op. cit., 189–201.
seems to be gaining popularity. Although they do not always state it explicitly, current researchers tend to use an integrated approach. A few other consequences of the theoretical turns are still noticeable. For example, studies seeking to explain, rather than merely to describe, class formation have not really flourished. Discourse analyses have expanded and a multitude of theoretical texts have been written on the relationship between class identity and language, but the material conditions have not received the same attention. When they have, it has often been in reaction to scholars announcing that class is ‘going away’. While matters concerning the construction of identities has flowered and rendered a substantial literature, the role of the material has not been discussed and developed in the same way. If the turns succeeded in anything long-lasting it was perhaps in decreeing which concepts and approaches were thinkable to advance. This is problematic because there are other ways to analyse class politics and its connection to industrial capitalism. The next section will draw attention to the importance of analysing the material economic conditions of class formation.

The economic bases of class formation

I am convinced that some of the fundamental ideas of the materialist conception of history are necessary if we want to explain class formation as a political process. Those ideas can help explain why people in similar life situations came together in organizations that identified them as a group called ‘workers’, but also why this historical process took different routes in different countries. One of the most basic ideas in this approach is to relate political events in the past to a theory of how society functions at the systemic level. I take this to mean, quoting Eric Hobsbawm, that the history of a class

cannot be written if it is isolated from other classes, from the states, institutions and ideas that provide their framework, from their historical heritage – and, obviously, from the transformations of the economies that require industrial wage-labour and have therefore created and transformed the classes of those who perform it.

The materialist approach to history is not an all-encompassing theory, but it still gives us ideas as to how the pieces fit together and which structures in

19 See, for example, S.G. McNall, R.F. Levine and R. Fantasia (eds), Bringing Class Back In. Contemporary and historical perspectives (Boulder, 1991); M.W. Steinberg, Fighting Words. Working-class formation, collective action, and discourse in early nineteenth-century England (New York, 1999); S.S. Porter, Working Women in Mexico City. Public discourses and material conditions, 1879–1931 (Tucson, 2003).
20 See, for example, N. Kirk (ed.), Social Class and Marxism. Defences and challenges (London, 1996); D. Kalb, Expanding Class. Power and everyday politics in industrial communities, the Netherlands, 1850–1950 (Durham, 1997); G. Eley, A Crooked Line. From cultural history to the history of society (Ann Arbor, 2005); F. Devine (ed.), Rethinking Class. Culture, identities and lifestyles (Basingstoke, 2005).
21 Hobsbawm, Worlds of Labour, iiiiv.
society have more impact than others. We cannot reduce every political action or event in nineteenth-century capitalist states to the idea of a trans-historical class struggle, but we must still analyse the actions of men and women against the backdrop of their social and economic conditions of existence. People’s social location predispose their wants, interests, needs and desires, and the given material and cultural structures of a historical social formation determine the boundaries of their ability to fulfil these needs.\textsuperscript{22} In this particular case, however, I am not interested in rethinking the concepts of class, experience or consciousness (the concepts problematized by the cultural turn). I disagree with the scope of that critique and hold that Thompson’s relational perspective remains incontestable. The experiences of proletarianization and marginalization arising from industrialization were evidently necessary conditions for a shared social consciousness amongst the working poor. Under certain circumstances and in certain times this social consciousness of class translated into political action. The interest lies in how we can further our understanding of class formation by utilizing the basic idea that material economic structures condition collective political movements.

Material conditions have often been perceived or discussed as the environment of the existing social classes in a society and have not included the economic foundations of politics. This particular interpretation of the material may be why the historiography of class formation has seldom highlighted the economics of working-class politics in explaining the rise, development and continuity or discontinuity of political action and political institutions. Swedish labour historian Åke Abrahamson made a case for treating the radical press as a commercial product some 40 years ago.\textsuperscript{23} Yet the commodification of politics at large has not garnered much scholarly attention. Steven Parfitt, however, has recently drawn attention to the lack of analysis of the economics of organizations in labour history.\textsuperscript{24} Using a study of the finances and money flows of local trade unions in the transnational Knights of Labour, Parfitt argues that global labour history would benefit from following the money in organizations, and that such investigations ‘might complicate or even transform our understanding of their historical development’.\textsuperscript{25} This could well be true not only for global labour movements, but for class formation itself as a historical process. Class-based organizations probably could not have developed and continued only as a result of people’s motivations. That is a far too idealistic interpretation. Motivation and interest are necessary conditions but not sufficient on their

\textsuperscript{22}Here I draw on the classic discussion in K. Marx, A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Moscow, 1977), ‘Preface’.
\textsuperscript{23}Abrahamson, op. cit., 26–32.
\textsuperscript{24}S. Parfitt, ‘A nexus between labour movement and labour movement: the Knights of Labor and the financial side of global labour history’, Labor History 58, 3 (2017), 288–302, here 288–90, 298–300.
\textsuperscript{25}ibid., 300.
own. This process cannot be reduced to cultural factors because organized politics also relies on workers being able to pay for political engagement and associations being able to secure resources. In the sphere of politics, existing political traditions, the powers of the state and political systems of thought, and the official ways to make claims, set margins for actions and exert pressure on participants. However, having the necessary resources to conduct politics is also a key factor, and the way in which resources are acquired in turn depends on the economic structures in a society. Workers’ associations often maintained that the number of members shall be unlimited, but becoming a member always came with an entrance fee. The struggle for freedom, justice, better wages and political involvement was simply not free of costs.

The model of analysis used in this article is not advanced in any way. It is grounded in the idea that we have to analyse the economic foundations of workers’ organizations in order to reach a full understanding of class formation. This kind of investigation must start with a sketch of how the society worked on a systemic level, including the economic and social situations of the men and women who engaged in class organizations, and then analyse the economics of those organizations over a historical period. Only at that point can we reach a full understanding of why an initial workers’ movement expanded. Every step of this investigation also entails thoughtful historical contextualization.

It seems safe to say that only England truly followed the development narrated by Thompson. Nineteenth-century Sweden had its own particular circumstances at the arrival of the first workers’ movement, including the occupational groups that participated and the ideological outlooks of its politics. Still, the consequences of industrialization, which brought about proletarianization and disrupted the traditional social fabric, were similar in both cases. So also were the chosen political methods, adopted from the new aspiring bourgeoisie, of forming associations and setting up a political press. Despite similarities between all nineteenth-century industrializing states, the marketization of every aspect of society was conditioned by local contexts and circumstances. This accounts for the development and integration of factories into local political milieux, the social relations of production, and the social class hierarchy of the specific region, town or society at large. State politics and prior political experience also mattered a great deal in setting up political organizations. For that reason, the next section of the article offers a background to the Swedish experience and first transitional phase of class formation and situates the Malmö New Workers’ Association in that context.

The two following sections comprise the more focused empirical investigations. The material economic conditions are approached by analysing the inflow of economic resources and the strategies that agents employed to ensure an organization’s survival and stability. The concept of economic
resources is used in a broad sense, referring to both money and movable assets or property. Yet, as implied, the economic strategies and reasoning related to these resources and the need to acquire them should also be analysed and contextualized. Although this analysis focuses on economic factors, there is still a need for multiple theoretical registers when approaching the subject. I understand the economic rationalities of agents as grounded in historically existing ways of thinking about resources, and these ideas as determined and delimited by existing economic structures. To quote Terry Eagleton in his fine book *Materialism*, '[m]eanings, values, judgments, intentions and interpretations are not separate from social activity'. Thinking is a material physical necessity, and thoughts and actions are for that reason always interconnected. Because thinking – rational as well as irrational – is a part of real life, languages, concepts and meanings are fundamental parts of people’s actions, wants and desires. Therefore, both resources and reasoning are considered historically specific and conditioned by the setting of nineteenth-century Sweden.

The initial empirical section discusses the Malmö association’s various sources of income using a partial collection of audit reports and board meeting minutes from the association’s establishment in 1872 until 1890. The end year of 1890 was chosen to mark the end of the first phase of class formation in Sweden. The second phase of class formation, characterized by Hobsbawm as a phase of ‘separatism’, fully emerged during the mid-1880s and 1890s when socialist agitation took hold and a larger labour movement was formed. The unions and associations of the second phase were more influenced by, and corresponded to, the presence of a larger corps of proletarians in a now fully developed industrial society. Here, a cautionary note needs to be inserted. Although this article focuses on the economics of a single association, the results are not presented as hard data. There are too few sources available to present, for example, an analysis of annual income – and audit reports from 1878 to 1884 are missing in the archives. The analysis is based on a reconstruction of trends extracted from reading the handwritten economic reports preserved from the period. The economic strategies of the associations are more easily identified. Meeting minutes are a rich source material when it comes to gaining insight into the economic reasoning of the governing boards. These records show that the association’s financial situation was a primary and recurring problem and allow the identification of a few of their main tactics of resource accumulation.

---

26Eley and Nield, op. cit., 189–201.
27T. Eagleton, *Materialism* (Yale, 2016), 85.
28Ibid., 87, 124.
29Hobsbawm, *Worlds of Labour*, op. cit., viii–ix; On the Swedish labour movement after 1890 see, for example, M. Hilson, *Political Change and the Rise of Labour in Comparative Perspective. Britain and Sweden 1890–1920* (Lund, 2006).
The second empirical section draws on one of the main findings from the general analysis of the economic conditions and discusses the key source of income during the period – owning and renting out property. The article concludes with a discussion of the relationship between class formation and the capitalist social formation, showing how a focus on material economic conditions can open new ways of understanding this relation and the first phase of class formation in the nineteenth century.

International historiographical trends have influenced changing understandings of Swedish labour during the last decades. The literature of the 1980s and 1990s relied heavily on the theoretical insights of Thompson and Hobsbawm, for example. The early twenty-first century saw increased integration of insights from feminist theory, cultural studies and discourse analysis. The culture and politics of different nineteenth-century occupational groups and institutions in Sweden such as unions, clubs and associations, have been studied extensively. The earliest liberal organizations have also been analysed from the theoretical perspective of class formation. Furthermore, Malmö is not uncharted territory in the historiography of class formation. Lars Edgren has told the history of the social, economic and political transformations of the crafts, craftsmen and journeymen in Malmö in a range of publications. His interpretation of the role of journeymen and their entry into liberal workers’ organizations is especially pertinent to this article. For the history of the working class and its relationship to industrialization in Malmö, it relies extensively on the work of Lars Berggren. In relation to the historiography of the Swedish workers’ movement and the process of class formation, therefore, the original contribution of this article lies solely and squarely in the area of the economics of workers’ associations.

30 See, for example, L. Edgren and L. Olsson, ‘Swedish working-class history’, International Labor and Working-Class History, 35 (Spring 1989), 69–80; L. Berggren, ‘Går det att skriva arbetarhistoriska synteser’, Historisk tidskrift, 123, 2 (2003); M. Hilson, S. Neunsinger and I. Vyll, ‘Introduction’ in M. Hilson, S. Neunsinger and I. Vyll (eds), Labour, Unions and Politics Under the North Star. The Nordic countries, 1700–2000 (New York, 2017), 28–33.

31 Labour history of course existed before the 1980s and 1990s. The large inventory of the liberal workers movement by A. Påhlman and W. Sjölin, Arbetarföreningarna i Sverige 1850–1900. En undersökning av den liberala arbetarrörelsens historia och kooperationens första skede (Stockholm, 1944) is a substantial contribution to the associational landscape of the first phase.

32 See, for example, U. Holgersson, Populärkulturen och klassamhället. Arbete, klass och genus i svensk damppress i början av 1900-talet (Lund, 2005); H. Blomqvist, Nation, ras och civilisation i svensk arbetarrörelse före nazismen (Stockholm, 2006).

33 See, for example, E. Gamby, Per Götrek och 1800-talets svenska arbetarrörelse (Stockholm, 1978); B. Skarin Frykman, Från yrkesfamilj till klassgemenskap. Om bagare i Göteborg 1800–1919 (Göteborg, 1985); B. Ragnerstam, Arbetare i rörelse. Historisk krönika (Stockholm 1986); L. Edgren, Lärling – gesäll – mästare. Hanter och hanterverkare i Malmö 1750–1847 (Lund, 1987); L. Magnusson, Den bråkiga kulturen. Förläggare och smideshanterverkare i Eskilstuna 1800–1850 (Stockholm, 1988); Horgby, Egeninne och skötsamhet, op.cit.; R. Ambjörnsson, Den skötsamme arbetaren. Idéer och ideal i ett norrländskt sädverkssamhälle 1880–1930 (Stockholm, 1988); M. Hurd, Public Spheres, Public Mores, and Democracy. Hamburg and Stockholm, 1870–1914 (Ann Arbor, 2000).

34 See, especially, Edgren, Lärling – gesäll – mästare, op.cit.; L. Edgren, ‘Hanterverkan och arbetarkulturen. En aspekt av klassformerings’, Scandia, 56, 2 (1990).

35 L. Berggren, Ångvisslans och brickornas värld. Om arbete och facklig organisering vid Kockums mekaniska verkstad och Carl Lunds fabrik i Malmö 1840–1905 (Malmö, 1991).
The first phase of class formation in Sweden

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Sweden was a predominantly agrarian and traditional state. The agrarian revolution that began in the late eighteenth century had led to population growth and proletarianization in the countryside. Some of the landless poor sought work in towns, boosting the urbanization that would later continue throughout the century. Others stayed in the countryside and worked part-time for wages under industrial-like conditions. The combination of an increase in the potential work force and the mechanization of manufacturing caused some regions and towns to start functioning like islands of industrial capitalism during the first half of the nineteenth century. This marketization of labour and the parallel centralization of production continued during the period, affecting the social fabric. The process led to the slow rise of a conscious economic bourgeoisie dwelling at first in the shadows of the old aristocracy (many of whom became capitalists), and the agrarian elites. It also created a growing mass of wageworkers: skilled artisans, factory workers and unskilled day-labourers. Some of these working-class people would eventually find themselves joining workers’ associations alongside other social groups.36

When did a labour movement first emerge in Sweden? Some have argued that the seeds of working people’s political action were sown in the urban hunger strikes and protests of the late eighteenth century. However, the 1840s mark the earlier beginning of institutionalized political action, collective organization and the rise of a popular press that formulated an identity of interests for ‘the workers’ or ‘the people’.37 Sweden saw the first wave of associations (bildningscirklar or ‘educational circles’) emerge from the artisan and craftsmen traditions in the mid-1840s. From the middle of the 1860s on, so-called workers’ associations (arbetareföreningar) arose in the cities and towns in Sweden. These associations, many of which attained unprecedented continuity, can be characterized as ‘liberal’ and interpreted as part of a first liberal workers movement.38

The first workers’ associations were born into a highly authoritative official political culture, in which liberalism was the dominant ideology of discontent and political democracy was at the end of the cognitive horizon. As Madeleine Hurd argued, the first associations belonged to a liberal public sphere in which reason, respectability and competence, not privileges and traditional values, reigned.39 The density of associational emergence was

---

36G. Therborn, Borgarklass och byråkrati i Sverige. Anteckningar om en solskenhistoria (Lund, 1989).
37Abrahamsson, op. cit., 15–22; A. Berg, Kampen om befolkningen. Den svenska nationsformeringsens utveckling och sociopolitiska förutsättningar ca 1780–1860 (Uppsala, 2011), 227–32.
38Påhlman and Sjölin, op. cit., 137–48.
39Hurd, op. cit., 9–15. On the associational world in nineteenth-century Sweden, see also T. Jansson, Adertonhundratalets associationer. Forskning och problem kring ett sprängfullt tomrum eller sammanslutningsprinciper och föreningsformer mellan två samhällsformationer ca 1800–1870 (Uppsala, 1985); S. Edquist, Nyktra svenskar. Godtemplarrörelsen och den nationella identiteten 1879–1918 (Uppsala, 2001).
highest in the southern and middle parts of Sweden, in the counties of Östergötland, Gävleborg and Malmöhus. Previous research has explained this density through the proximity of the area to the rest of Europe and the quick spread of liberal ideas in these counties’ towns and cities.\footnote{Påhlman and Sjölin, op. cit., 151–3.} Politically, the associations worked for the expansion of the franchise to marginalized segments of society. Since 1866, the right to vote in national elections depended on being male and paying taxes on a certain amount of capital or a yearly wage over 800 Swedish krona (SEK).\footnote{Throughout this article figures are presented to the nearest whole number in SEK.} Workers and lower service classes did not earn enough annually to be eligible to vote for representatives to the second chamber of the Riksdag (the Swedish parliament); indeed, only 5\% of the population of Sweden could vote in the 1870s. The major political project of the workers’ associations was therefore to make the lower orders into political citizens, not to agitate for socialism, revolution or economic reform.

The first workers’ movement was decentralized. There were attempts to gather representatives from all associations at larger Nordic Workers Meetings in the 1870s and 1880s, but a central committee was never formed. On some issues, like the vote for women, the associations were also in a disagreement. One of their political practices was to send petitions to the government to reform the electoral system and to push for issues such as public military service and public schooling. Before petitions were sent in, they were usually circulated amongst the local associations. Correspondence, and appendices to the petitions themselves, show that they seldom agreed. From the mid-1880s, when social democratic agitation and propaganda began, some of the associations aligned with the Social Democratic Party and others remain politically independent. It was also significant that the politics of the associations were highly related to specific \textit{milieux} and to the social groups and classes that joined them. Along with the Nordic Workers Meetings, attempts were made to set up newspapers to tie the movement together. These projects seldom lasted more than a couple of years before they were forced to shut down due to mismanagement or economic hardship.\footnote{Påhlman and Sjölin, op. cit., 177–85.}

The first workers’ associations served social functions by offering security and welfare-like aid in the form of survivors’ pensions for widows and sickness and death benefits. Administering social benefits seems to have been a large portion of the associations’ day-to-day work. The social and economic activities were probably what first attracted members to the organizations.\footnote{C. Landellius, \textit{1840–1850-talets bildningscirklar och arbetareföreningar i Sverige}, vols 1 & 2 (Stockholm, 1936); Påhlman and Sjölin, op. cit., 185–7.} Generally, members were a blend of artisans, craftsmen, master craftsmen and industrial workers. Academic types such as liberal-oriented journalists,
teachers and physicians – and even business-owners – also engaged in working-class politics, functioning as intellectuals, advisers or instructors.\textsuperscript{44} This was therefore not a purely working class or proletarian movement. The movement was mainly joined by the politically disenfranchised, and the proportion of members from the proletariat differed between associations. The mixed social make-up may help explain the liberal programme – these associations were highly influenced by middle-class values and politics.

The port town of Malmö – one of the larger industrial cities in the southernmost part of Sweden – had a booming mechanical and shipbuilding industry and a growing working-class population as well as social groups engaged in trade and craft production. Malmö was the seat of government and economic centre of Malmöhus, a county with one of the highest density of popular associational engagement at the time. The growing working population came primarily from the countryside and were drawn to Malmö because of the expanding mechanical industry. Changes in craft production, especially after the abolishment of the guilds and the marketization of craft production in 1846, disrupted the traditional way of life of craftsmen. In certain crafts, artisans were increasingly paid in wages.\textsuperscript{45} Craft production and smaller factories were constant features of Malmö’s industrial landscape in the nineteenth century, but larger factory units also emerged. One of the largest companies was Kockums Mechanical Plant. From the 1840s onwards, Kockums manufactured a range of iron products such as railway carriages, steam boilers, ships and machines for sugar refinery.\textsuperscript{46} Another mechanical plant was Carl Lund’s Factory, which mass produced domestic goods such as household vessels, cutlery, dishpans and mailboxes.\textsuperscript{47} In addition to workers’ associations, a rather large union movement established itself in Malmö. For example, in 1884, 77% of the workers at the Kockums Mechanical Plant were organized.\textsuperscript{48} While the 1880s can be regarded as a growth phase in the history of the Malmö unions, the 1890s saw organized strikes for improved and safer working conditions and for higher wages.\textsuperscript{49}

From 1872 to 1890, the Malmö New Workers’ Association had from 300 to 500 active members from various occupational groups each year.\textsuperscript{50} The majority belonged to the lower strata of craftsmen or were factory workers, some belonged to the petite bourgeoisie of shopkeepers and artisan masters, some were middle-class school teachers and administrators, and others were even capitalists. The large proportion of craftsmen was typical of the first

\textsuperscript{44}Hilson, op. cit., 34–41; Berg, 
\textit{Kampen om befolkningen}, op.cit., ch. 7.
\textsuperscript{45}Påhlman and Sjölin, op. cit., 150–53; Edgren, 
\textit{Lärling – gesäll – måstare}, op.cit., 237–9, 294–6.
\textsuperscript{46}Berggren, op. cit., 60–3.
\textsuperscript{47}\textit{ibid.}, 72–3.
\textsuperscript{48}\textit{ibid.}, 24, 144.
\textsuperscript{49}\textit{ibid.}, 239.
\textsuperscript{50}Malmö stadsarkiv (Malmö city archive, subsequently MSA), Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv, A:1:1, Protokoll 1872–1877, Årsberättelse för 1876; 
\textit{revisionsberättelse} (Malmö nya Arbetareförening, Malmö 1888).
phase of class formation. As Lars Edgren showed, journeymen were engaged in the first liberal workers’ movement largely because they valued self-reliance and self-help. Their social consciousness fitted well with the mid-century liberal ideology, and they had practical experience in defending their working conditions and taking part in communal social matters.\textsuperscript{51}

Missing from this association were the conservative classes of civil servants and the nobility, the agrarian middle classes and the rural poor. The governing board, the intellectuals, were often a blend of local politicians, petit bourgeois and workers.

The governing board, chosen annually by members at a large assembly, was responsible for the association’s day-to-day management and long-term economic planning. They acted and spoke for the association, made minor decisions and upheld agreed-upon regulations and statutes. Major decisions regarding the organization’s structure, political reform and the like were always put to a vote at monthly assemblies. The governing board, which could only consist of men, also strategized regarding the association’s economy and managed the association’s money and property.\textsuperscript{52}

What did the Malmö association offer its members? The association set up and managed mutual aid projects in the form of survivors’ pensions for working-class widows and sickness and death benefit funds.\textsuperscript{53} This possibility of economic and social security was probably an important reason for people to join the association. Politically, they worked mainly for the expansion of the franchise. They arranged local meetings with left-leaning or liberal parliamentary representatives before elections to try to influence their political sympathies towards universal franchise.\textsuperscript{54} They also recruited members of parliament to be their representatives. One example was C.A. Andersson, a long-standing member of the governing board and also a representative in the second chamber of parliament (1881–99). As a member of parliament, he pushed for expanded rights for workers and better economic conditions for the poor. He justified his political views against the background that he was a member of the governing board of the Malmö association and that he himself came from a working-class background. In a discussion in the second chamber in 1883, he explained that he had the necessary experience to speak on behalf of the workers because of his childhood – his upbringing in a worker’s family – and that he himself indeed was a worker.\textsuperscript{55}

\textsuperscript{51}Edgren, Lärling – gesäll – mästare, op. cit., 294–303; Edgren, ‘Hantverkarna och arbetarkulturen’, op. cit., [232]-256.
\textsuperscript{52}Reglemente för Malmö nya Arbetareförening (Malmö nya Arbetareförening, Malmö 1872), 1–2, 4–6, 9–10; Reglemente för Malmö nya Arbetareförening (Malmö nya Arbetareförening, Malmö 1884), 1–7.
\textsuperscript{53}’Malmö nya arbetareförening’, Malmö nya allehanda, 14 November 1874, n.p.; ‘Malmö nya arbetareförening’, Malmö nya allehanda, 28 August 1875, n.p.
\textsuperscript{54}MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening’s arkiv, F:1:1 Handlelgrar rörande verksamheten 1879–1994, Minutes 22 August 1881; ‘Wålmtiten’, Malmö nya allehanda, 10 September 1884, n.p.
\textsuperscript{55}C.A. Andersson’s statement in the parliament, in Riksdagens protokoll vid lagtima riksmötet år 1883, Andra kammaren no. 52, (Stockholm, 1867–1948), 40.
The political and social projects of the Malmö association make it a reasonable example of the first liberal phase. However, the association was not consistent in its programme. The *Malmö nya allehanda*, a local right-wing liberal newspaper, continually reported on and monitored the workings of the association. The newspaper praised the association when it offered scientific lectures or encouraged workers to participate in joint aid projects, but criticized it for hosting a meeting with a Danish socialist association and warned it against associating with such subversive elements. It also praised the association for not joining the large socialist assembly in Stockholm led by the social democratic intellectual August Palm in 1881. These reports must, of course, be considered in light of the source – the newspaper clearly had a political agenda. Still, the association’s possible ideological shiftiness is shown in the fact that it invited some socialists but rejected others.

In the area of culture, the association subscribed to a range of newspapers and had a significant collection of books. The newspapers included both the popular and the liberal press. The association also, as mentioned, offered lectures, usually by local politicians or teachers at Malmö’s upper secondary school. The details of the lectures and their content are not in the association’s archives, but *Malmö nya allehanda* reported that they were a mix of moral treatises on the importance of individual responsibility, sobriety, cleanliness, history, and science, working conditions, the need to cooperate and so on. The association also held discussion meetings to practise how to debate and resolve political issues in an organized communal manner. Debates included subjects such as the influence public military service should have on citizenship status, the state legislature and propositions regarding the use of children and youth in factories.

The Malmö New Workers’ Association was actually founded on the financial ruins of an earlier association in 1872. The earlier Malmö Workers’ Association (1867–71) had declared bankruptcy in December 1871. Audit reports show that many of the Malmö New Workers Association’s expenses were related to the assembly hall, a necessary condition for communal politics. This hall housed the library and other facilities, and was the main space for meetings, recreational activities such as dances, musical performances or other festivities, public lectures and dinners. Not

56 *Malmö nya arbetareförening*, *Malmö nya allehanda* 31 December 1873, n.p.; ’Populära föredrag’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 5 December 1874, n.p.; ’Malmö nya arbetareförening’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 7 February 1877, n.p.
57 ’Socialistisk förening i Malmö’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 27 July 1875, n.p.
58 ’Socialistmøte i Stockholm’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 7 January 1882, n.p.
59 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Minutes 18 December 1873.
60 ’Malmö nya arbetareförening’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 25 April 1874, n.p.; ’Malmö nya arbetareförening’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 2 February 1876, n.p.; ’Malmö nya arbetareförening’, *Malmö nya allehanda*, 2 May 1883, n.p.
61 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Kommittén för bildning och nöje, Minutes 14 February 1875.
62 MSA, Handlingar efter ämne F:1, Malmö arbetarförening, Malmö arbetareförenings protokoll 1870–1872, Minutes 11 December 1871.
only did the association regularly buy books and newspapers to fill the library, but it paid for heating, gas lighting, a janitor and anything else needed for meetings, such as low-priced consumer goods, food and beverages. The assembly hall generated the largest single type of expense in the audit reports during the period of investigation. However, as we shall soon discover, it was also the most important source of income.63

The reliance on commercial activities

To establish the material economic foundations of the first phase of class formation, we need to study the income and economic strategies of working-class associations. So, what were the sources of income for the new Malmö association? First, the audit reports indicate that no resources of any kind – money, movable assets or property – came from public subsidies. The association’s income came entirely from private individuals, ventures and forces. From this large category, a few smaller types can be deduced: membership fees, donations, loans from the local bank, savings interest and commercial activities. Commercial activities ranged from arranging events like banquets and festivities to renting out property.

Of these smaller categories, donations seem to have brought in the least income. Donations to the association could include money or items such as books, for which the market value could be fairly high. Usually cash donations were small, such as coat checking fees at a soirée.64 It is extremely likely that these small sums or goods were welcome contributions that helped forge connections with other associations and individuals, but they did not provide a steady income to the association.

Donations and gifts are nevertheless interesting to discuss from the perspective of power and influence, especially when they came from the bourgeoisie. After the first Malmö association declared bankruptcy, the new interim board of governors sold its inventory of movable assets at auction. The bookcases, notebooks, other reading materials and even the association’s embroidered banner were sold. These items were soon given to the new association, but not without conditions. The re-donation of these items came from A.E. Forslund, owner of a cigar factory, in exchange for stipulations regarding conduct. In his letter of intent, he described the conditions that the association needed to meet in order to receive the items. Forslund’s...
demands included rules on how the books should be stored and he insisted that book loans be free of charge. He even demanded that the old banner with its motto should not be changed, and the paradigm of usefulness, education and self-help should be kept intact.\textsuperscript{65} The governing board accepted these conditions.\textsuperscript{66}

Some of the money was put into a savings account, from which the association earned a small amount of interest income.\textsuperscript{67} Some of the savings were also held in the association’s cash register and not deposited into the bank. According to the association’s regulations, the treasurer was responsible for managing both the bank deposits and the cash register.\textsuperscript{68} As bank loans and savings account interest became increasingly important for individuals and companies, it might be presumed that private associations also used them. However, the association seldom took bank loans for small amounts of money. Its one and only loan was a commercial equity loan for the property that the association purchased in the mid-1880s. This loan is discussed in more depth in the next section, but it is obvious that workers’ associations were influenced by and needed to abide by the debt-based economy of the nineteenth century. Banks were important actors and taking loans was an important survival strategy for private households as well as private organizations at this time.\textsuperscript{69}

The second most important source of income came from members in the form of membership fees and money spent on the various social events and festivities offered by the organization. These events included the organization’s own banquets and fairs, such as the annual Christmas market. The association’s 1872 Christmas market brought in approximately 560 SEK in profits alone. Half of this was given to the needy in the wake of a storm that had likely left some people homeless. A small sum was donated to the local kindergarten, and the rest was placed in a building fund.\textsuperscript{70} Holding such fairs, banquets and balls, however, depended on having both a functional piece of property and people willing and able to attend such events. Some of the members, especially business-owners, educated professionals, small merchants and master craftsmen could certainly afford these events in addition to paying membership fees, but wage-labourers such as tobacco workers, journeymen, carpenters, textile workers, postmen, coast guards and coachmen probably did not have the same economic possibilities.
Scholars have shown that late nineteenth-century political movements, such as the women’s movement, relied on members to spend part of their incomes on their cause. This is partially true for the Malmö case. Membership fees were the most important source of income for the association during its early years, but quickly dropped to the second most important source. The membership fees (relating to the year 1873) constituted 2025 SEK of the total estimated income of 3925 SEK for 1874. However, in the audit report of 1889, membership fees amounted to only 1771 SEK out of a total income of 9365 SEK. How can we explain the declining importance of membership fees during this period?

First, although real wages for urban industrial male workers increased steadily from the 1860s, how much money did an urban worker really have after paying for food, housing and other necessities? Information on the wages of unskilled urban workers is sparse for the case of Sweden before the 1910s; a few publications, however, have discussed and calculated these wages generally and locally. The number of people employed in industry was a small but growing segment of wage workers in the nineteenth century, but most were still employed as agricultural workers. For unskilled wage work in towns and cities, there was no standardization of working hours, wages or even the form of employment. For factory work in the private sector, wages and working hours could vary significantly between different industries. Gender and age also contributed to differences in wages. Adult female workers earned less than adult males and, in some cases, even less than male children. According to estimates by Björn Horgby, a male worker employed in a factory earned around 500 SEK per year in the 1860s. During the 1870s, wages increased to about 700 SEK, though they decreased significantly during the economic crisis at the end of the decade. Wages began to increase again in the 1880s, reaching nearly 750 SEK per year by the end of the decade.

What can be said about the wages in Malmö? Lars Berggren discussed and analysed the wages of different working-class occupations at Kockum’s Mechanical Plant in 1871 and 1898 and showed large differences between occupational groups in both years. A moulder could earn 12 SEK per week.

---

71 P. Jonsson and S. Neunsinger, *Gendered Money. Financial organization in women’s movements, 1880–1933* (New York, 2012).
72 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Förslag till inkomst- och utgift-stat vid Malmö Nya Arbetareförening för år 1874 (1873).
73 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv, G:2:3 Övriga handlingar rörande ekonomi, Revisionsberättelser tryckta 1887, 1890–1957, Revisionsberättelse (1890).
74 J. Söderberg, ‘Long-term trends in real wages of labourers’ in R. Edvinsson, T. Jacobson and D. Waldenström (eds), *Historical Monetary and Financial Statistics for Sweden. Exchange rates, prices, and wages, 1277–2008* (Stockholm, 2010), 458–65.
75 Ibid., 453–78; E. Bengtsson, ‘Inequality and the working class in Scandinavia 1800 to 1910: workers’ share of growing incomes’, *Investigaciones de Historia Económica*, 13, 3 (2017), 180–89.
76 B. Horgby, *Den disciplinerade arbetaren. Brottslighet och social förändring i Norrköping 1850–1910* (Stockholm 1986), 80–3.
in 1871, while a day labourer earned only 6 SEK. Berggren calculated the 1871 income of those earning the median weekly wage of 7.20 SEK at Kockum’s as 374 SEK. Those in occupations with higher weekly wages of around 12 SEK earned about 624 SEK annually, which is significant because wages of about 15 SEK per week were needed to meet the financial and tax-based requirements to earn political voting rights.\(^{77}\) The difference in wages between occupational groups continued through the following decades, but wages did increase during the 1890s. In 1898 the median annual wage for all employees at Kockum’s was 887 SEK.\(^{78}\)

If we trust those figures, could working men afford to join associations like the one in Malmö? First, a new member paid an admission fee of 1 SEK for a man and half a SEK (50 öre or Swedish cents) for a woman. Every new member was also required to buy a membership badge and a small pamphlet with the association’s regulations for 25 Swedish cents. Membership fees (3 SEK for men and 2 SEK for women) were then to be paid either every four months or annually at the beginning of the year.\(^{79}\) This payment structure remained largely the same throughout the period. In 1884, the annual fee was raised to 4 SEK for men, but the other costs and fees remained the same.\(^{80}\) So could a male worker, for whom we have an estimated annual wage, afford to be a member? According to the estimations made by Johan Söderberg on real wages versus costs of living, an urban worker had 4% of their income left to spend on items other than necessary goods such as food, heating and clothing in 1830–1913.\(^{81}\) Assuming that a higher paid urban male factory worker in the 1870s earned about 624 SEK per year, he could spend about 25 SEK on recreation and other activities annually. Being a member of the Malmö New Workers Association cost 4.25 SEK the first year and 3 SEK thereafter. It is clear that such a worker could choose to spend that much money, but research on working-class culture and its economic rationalities also shows that working people at this time generally did not have enough money to plan ahead and to save. It is important also to consider that wages were usually paid weekly and workers were extremely vulnerable to quick changes in the housing, food and beverage markets, often forced to pawn their belongings.\(^{82}\) This economic situation partially explains why the association offered small loans to members in need over the entire period of investigation. Small cash loans were issued to members in exchange for security. For example, a seamstress with the surname Nilsson was lent 50 SEK in 1877. Nilsson was deemed trustworthy by the

\(^{77}\) Berggren, op. cit., 346–7.
\(^{78}\) ibid., 348–9.
\(^{79}\) *Reglemente för Malmö nya arbetareförening* (Malmö nya arbetareförening, Malmö 1872), 3.
\(^{80}\) ibid.
\(^{81}\) Söderberg, op. cit., 454.
\(^{82}\) Horgby, *Egensinne och skötsamhet*, op. cit., 182–8.
association and given a loan because she had bondsmen who owned property and would guarantee her loan.  

The regular membership fees, therefore, although important to the association, could not be relied upon as a steady source of income. Problems concerning membership fees recur in the board minutes throughout the period. Members came and went, missed payments or even refused to pay, which may explain why the fees did not change significantly in the two decades under analysis. Being a member was simply too costly for the majority of the workers to whom the association appealed. It is also worth considering that some workers were probably engaged in unions at the same time. The unions and their struggle for higher wages were possibly a more rational investment than the social and recreational benefits of the Malmö association. Scholars of the early unions have shown that their membership fees were also a constant issue. In the late 1880s, the Iron Workers Union in Malmö raised their fee to 0.15 SEK per week, that is, 7.80 SEK per year. This was met with protests and a drop in membership, which eventually led to the fee being lowered again. So, people’s ability to pay was related to their income in this case also.  

Because the association could not rely on membership fees from members whose income was insecure, it was impossible for the board to calculate and plan a credible budget based on these fees. It may have been even more difficult to depend on members’ willingness to pay for associations that organized social events and offered learning opportunities than for unions that had purely economic goals.

What, then, was the main source of income for the association? The majority of income came from renting out the association’s assembly hall and flats on its property. It is clear from the annual reports that income related to the property the association rented and later owned increased from 25 to 70% of the total income. The budget for the year 1874 predicted that income from membership fees would be 2025 SEK, and income from renting out the assembly hall and profits from the association’s restaurant was projected to be only 1000 of a total 3925 SEK. Thus, the association estimated that members, not its property, would be the main source of income. However, income generated by the property gradually increased over the years, reversing the relative importance of these two sources of income. In 1887, the estimated income from the assembly hall and other parts of the property was 5300 of a total 7400 SEK. In an audit report for the year 1889, earnings related to the property were 6604 SEK of a total

83MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Minutes 25 April 1877.
84Berggren, op. cit., 151–2.
85MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Förslag till inkomst- och utgift-stat vid Malmö Nya Arbetareförening för år 1874.
86MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, F:1:2 Handlingar rörande verksamheten 1880–1983, Inkomst- och Utgiftsförslag vid Malmö nya Arbetareförening för år 1887.
income of 9369 SEK. Thus, during the latter half of the 1880s, 70% of the association’s income came from the property.

Before 1884 the association did not own a building or any other property. It rented properties with large assembly halls, and in turn rented them out to other organizations or individuals when not in use. For example, in December 1873 the association decided to rent out their assembly hall to a theatrical entrepreneur. The association did, however, require that their own ‘disciplinary corps’ oversee their theatrical performance nights, for which they also charged the theatrical entrepreneur. The association would also rent the assembly hall to religious communities that held prayer meetings or Sunday schools. Sometimes even the furniture – such as chairs, tables and benches – was rented out as well. Furthermore, the assembly hall needed a restaurant for its members, so leasing out the restaurant space also provided a steady yearly income.

In the end, renting, subletting and later owning property became the main survival strategy for the association. The Malmö case therefore indicates that working-class organizations survived in part by engaging in commercial activities. To borrow a term from Karl Polanyi, we can explain this tactic by characterizing the historical context as a self-regulated market society. A self-regulated market society – an economic structure without state intervention or state regulation – was the condition into which working-class organizations were born and survived. To maintain a steady flow of income, they needed to navigate the market. In the light of its economic significance for the association, this article will describe next and in more depth the issues surrounding renting and owning property.

A home for profit and for use

Class politics in its organized collective form – individuals gathering and exchanging their experiences and dreams, having discussions and reading together – depended on having a legitimate space for assembly. Legitimacy is an important aspect here, because public meetings in towns and squares were not allowed and could be deemed suspicious or unlawful by local government. Therefore, having a place to meet was a key issue for collective organization, which explains why the quest for such places was a continuing problem. A building with a large assembly hall and smaller rooms for gatherings clearly had use value.

87 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, G:2:3 Övriga handlingar rörande ekonomi, Revisionsberättelser tryckta 1887, 1890–1957, Revisionsberättelse (1890).
88 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Minutes 18 December 1873.
89 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Minutes 15 April 1877.
90 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Minutes 11 July 1872.
91 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Förslag till inkomst och utgifts-stat vid Malmö nya arbetareförening för år 1874.
92 K. Polanyi, Origins of Our Time. The great transformation (London, 1946), 71–80.
A building also had exchange value. The nineteenth century was the century of unregulated capitalism. The only systems of decommodification that existed, such as health insurance, were private and thus dependent on the market. Real property, including private housing such as small flats and larger buildings such as factories and assembly halls, was largely an unregulated commodity in this period, which is why public rental housing became an important social and political welfare issue during the twentieth century. During the nineteenth century, the free market decided prices, often forcing the poorest people to live in cramped and unhygienic conditions. Housing was not a purely economic issue, however. For the bourgeoisie, owning a large and respectable piece of property in the right urban milieu was a status symbol. In Sweden, owning property became even more important after the introduction of new voting rules in the Municipal Act of 1862. Property, individually or communally owned, was a kind of capital and was therefore used to generate income through local taxation. A juridical ‘person’ – an individual, organization or company – who owned taxed property had the right to vote and take part in the local political process. Ownership of taxable capital was therefore important for obtaining political respectability and citizenship.

The Malmö association was never explicitly motivated to buy a large building for any other than purely economic reasons. In the late 1870s, however, the question of how the Malmö association could acquire property of its own consistently came up for debate. Although renting an assembly hall, with space for recreational facilities such as a library, was the largest expense of the association, it was also the largest and most stable source of income. The chance to consolidate that expense and have a reliable source of income explains in part why the board minutes are so full of discussion about the association’s housing and rental situation during the period. Because the income from the membership fees was lower than estimated, owning property became increasingly important.

A similar reason for buying instead of renting was related to continuity and security. The association rented different buildings from 1873 to 1884, which left the association open to instability. Buildings could change owners and rental contracts could be terminated, forcing the association to move around. This sentiment was expressed in relation to the move in 1876, when the board decided to rent a large hall

93 T. Strömberg, ‘The politicization of the housing market: the Social Democrats and the housing market’ in K. Misgeld, K. Molin and K. Åmark (eds), Creating Social Democracy. A century of the Social Democratic Labor Party in Sweden (University Park/Pennsylvania, 1992), 239–41.
94 E. Blackmar, Manhattan for Rent, 1785–1850 (Ithaca, 1991); M. Deland, The Social City. Middle-way approaches to housing and suburban governmentality in southern Stockholm 1900–1945 (Stockholm, 2001).
95 Deland, op. cit., 112; H. Forsell, Property, Tenancy & Urban Growth in Stockholm & Berlin, 1860–1920 (Burlington, 2005), 259.
96 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Årsberättelse för 1876.
with seven additional rooms. The contract stated that they would pay 3500 SEK per year for two years beginning in April 1877. However, the president of the association at the time clearly stated that moving around was troublesome and the association needed to concentrate on ‘putting a roof over its own head’. 

A plan to buy a large property was set in motion in the late 1870s. The association employed a range of strategies to generate the necessary initial capital. A building fund was created into which the profits from fairs and other festivities were invested. Another strategy was to create a fund in which members could invest small amounts of money (Swedish cents rather than SEK) into the building project. It would take until 1884 for the governing board to issue an invitation to the wider public to participate in the endeavour. The invitation stated that the organization intended to buy a property in the Hamburg quarters in Malmö consisting of a two-story building, which could be used for the association’s meetings, and a piece of land where rental housing could eventually be built for additional income. Thus, the strategy of building rental housing on the property was explicitly mentioned in the invitation. The price of the property was 42,000 SEK, but the association stated that it needed an extra 20,000 SEK to renovate the main building and to build a few smaller buildings. The mortgage on the property was 30,000 SEK, so the association needed an extra 32,000 SEK to both make the final payments and renovate the property. The organization could contribute 6000 SEK from its own cash assets but needed help raising the remaining 26,000 SEK. The system was organized so that the 26,000 SEK was split into 100 SEK units, and each person who gave money would receive 5% interest back on their investment. When a person loaned 100 SEK to the organization, they also received a numbered investment certificate. Every year the organization held a lottery in which a couple of numbers were drawn, and the winners were given their money back with interest. The property itself was the security for the private loan system; the organization calculated that the revenue generated by renting out the assembly hall and the additional housing would eventually cover the cost of paying back these loans. The audit reports show that the first lottery took place on 31 October 1886 and the last certificate was cashed in on 27 September 1894. In the end, the Malmö New Workers’ Association was indeed able to put a roof over its head and secure its survival.

97 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Minutes 26 December 1876.
98 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, A:1:1 Protokoll 1872–1877, Årsberättelse för 1876.
99 G.A. Nilsson, Stadgar för Öresfonden inom Malmö nya Arbetareförening (Malmö, 1880); MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförening, F:1:2 Handlingar rörande verksamheten 1880–1893, Revisionsberättelse öfver Öresfondens ställning den 6e februari 1881.
100 MSA, Malmö nya arbetareförenings arkiv, G:2:3 Övriga handlingar rörande ekonomi, Revisionsberättelser tryckta 1887, 1890–1957, Revisionsberättelse (1888).
The earliest class organizations existed in a developing market society. If we consider how agents move through – and at the same time against – dominant structures, we can see the historical logic in the fact that organizations such as the Malmö association used commercial solutions for economic problems. It is important, however, to remember that the overall goal of the association was to maintain a stable and steady operation, not to make a profit. The association even acted philanthropically, giving money to the poor and the sick, even though these idealistic and social endeavours came with monetary costs. The strategy of owning property and renting out housing was a way to make money from their largest expense, the assembly space. A building was, in many regards, an indispensable commodity with both use value and exchange value. In the end, the existence and survival of the Malmö association as a collective unit was conditioned by the developing market society into which the association was born.

**Conclusion**

The first phase of class formation in mid- to late-nineteenth-century Sweden was characterized by its liberal stance. In this transitional phase, industrial workers, craftsmen and small producers gathered in formal associations as ‘workers’. The middle classes and even the bourgeoisie often supported these endeavours in various ways. The first workers’ associations to gain organizational stability focused on attaining political rights and representation and offered self-help, education and social and economic support.

Over a period of more than 50 years, scholars have developed, criticized and theoretically recast Thompson’s statement in *The Making on how working men and women developed a consciousness of class and how working-class institutions emerged. This article has sought to expand and widen our view of the material conditions of class formation. Industrialization no doubt created new class situations and common experiences amongst working people that led to the first phase of class formation. Yet the development of formal political organizations rested on certain economic conditions of existence that need to be integrated into our explanations of the course and development of class formation.

The rise and survival of the first workers’ associations seems to have depended on the market in various ways. The work, food and housing markets and the overall economic structure decided workers’ wages and rates of consumption. These factors presumably had an impact on working people’s willingness to enter into associations like the Malmö New Workers’ Association. At its founding this organization depended on membership fees to cover its operating costs but it eventually came to rely on commercial endeavours, acting as an investor and in some ways even an entrepreneur on the market. Hosting fairs and other festivities
were important commercial activities that contributed to income, but the income from navigating the property market and renting out parts of the association’s own property was the most important factor in ensuring the association’s economic survival.

The economic strategy to enter the property market – and the commercial thinking it relied on – was an effect of the historically specific milieu into which the association was born. Commercial thinking about organizational economic practice ensured the association’s social and political survival. It is important to recognize that the commercial strategies of the association were different from those of industrial capitalists or merchants in that, although the commercial activity of property ownership was employed to generate profits, that property was also used to further the aims of the association. The reliance on commercial activities shown in only one case study should not be overstated. This historical setting, however, characterized by the marketization of social life, is very likely to have conditioned agents other than those in the Malmö case. It is reasonable to suppose that this economic structure of resource accumulation influenced the practical arrangements of class-related institutions on a more general level during the first phase. The market and the making of class, at least in the first transitional phase, were in all probability essentially intertwined. The material economic conditions of the market and the rationalities it carried with it, should therefore be considered important explanatory factors in the course of class formation.

Yet, although commercial activities were an important condition for the first transitional phase of class formation and its expression through workers’ associations, it seems likely that they decreased in importance in relation to the trade unions of the 1870s and 1880s. Thus, in later decades (which saw the rise of a socialist labour movement and of the Social Democratic Party in Sweden), the organizations associated with the second phase of class formation had a more mixed economic foundation. Such a hypothesis requires further empirical investigation. Nevertheless, it can be concluded that explanations of class formation cannot be based solely on concepts such as discourse, culture, identity or even class experience. Rather, the material economic conditions of the historical process must be incorporated into our thinking.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my gratitude to the Research Group on Political Culture at the University of South-Eastern Norway and especially Professor Nils Ivar Agøy, who commented on my work at an early stage and gave me important feedback. I would also like to thank the research milieu Uppsala Studies of History and Education (SHED) at Uppsala University and especially Christin Mays, who proofread the whole article.
Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This article was written as part of the research project ‘The Cost of Freedom? The Material Conditions of the Rise of Civil Society in Sweden During the Nineteenth Century’. This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council under Grant number 2017-03204.

ORCID

Anne Berg http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0797-4871