CHAPTER THREE

THE SWEDISH CASE: DID POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY AND REPRESENTATIVE DEMOCRACY EXIST IN SWEDEN BEFORE 1772?

Lord [...] do not let our blessed form of government fall into anarchical and lawless democracy [sjelfswäldig och laglös Democratie], which can only be cured by tyranny and sovereignty [Tyrannie och Souverainité].

If that is to be called democracy, then according to the law democracy belongs to the Estates of the Realm in their plenary sessions, and in my thoughts I shall always remain committed to a democracy so constituted on the basis of our law.

The Swedish Age of Liberty (1718–1772), an era when the royal prerogative was taken over by the Senate and the four-estate Diet, is a fascinating period from the point of view of the comparative history of popular sovereignty and democracy. Its late phase (1769–1772) produced contradictory references to the concept of democracy like those cited above. The debate on democracy at the Swedish Diet, as recorded in its minutes, was more active than in the British Parliament during the same period. Members of the Diet could either pray to God to save their country from democracy or—in the midst of a heated debate on the form of government—suggest ironically that the current form of government actually contained a major element of democracy.

Historians have written a lot about the breakthrough of the principle of popular sovereignty and the rise of democratic debate and practice in Sweden in the late Age of Liberty. Most of their conclusions have been reached by applying the generalizing concepts of popular sovereignty.
sovereignty and democracy in their interpretation of the eighteenth-century political reality. However, little systematic analysis of the actual language which was used by contemporaries to describe the political role of the people has been carried out.

In this chapter, I shall analyse the vocabulary by which the political role of the people and the form of government known since classical times as democracy were described by Swedish statesmen and journalists during the last years of the Age of Liberty. My goal is to elucidate to what extent the Swedish political elite (comprising the members of the Estates who actually attended the Diet and a number of political writers) understood their political community in a way that would legitimate the use of the terms ‘popular sovereignty’ and ‘representative democracy’ by us historians to depict their political system. I ask to what extent it had become possible to recognize popular sovereignty and democracy as positive phenomena which could be seen as defining both the political conceptions of individual actors and the regime of the Age of Liberty as a whole. This leads us to the question of whether these concepts in their modern, positive and post-revolutionary senses already existed in Sweden at the time of the royal coup of 1772, and whether Sweden thus experienced a modernization of attitudes to democracy that predated that of the rest of Europe. Alternatively, a comparative reading of the sources may reveal patterns of thought that were quite conventional among the political elites of the “free states” in Europe. The results of this analysis, while demonstrating the important role that references to the people in politics played in Sweden, will challenge some previous interpretations of the late Age of Liberty as an era that witnessed considerable progress in democracy.

I have chosen to focus on the last years of the Age of Liberty (1769–1772) as they have traditionally been seen as a period when the political debate reached its most radical phase, producing arguments that have been regarded as anticipating those of the French Revolution. Quite extensive claims have been put forward about the radicalization of the Swedish political culture and about Sweden developing as a political community towards modern democracy based on the principle of popular sovereignty. Before historians can legitimately characterize the regime and the politicians of the Age of Liberty as democratic, they must first demonstrate that the actors themselves understood their

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3 Fahlbeck 1915, 330–331.