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Vagueness and *Värnplikt* in Sweden

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Enduring Conscription:

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Anna Leander

“Conscription: it’s had its day” (*Economist*, 10 February 1996). This judgement is widely shared. Many countries are in the process of abolishing or phasing out conscription as a form of military recruitment. The US, the UK, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Portugal and France have abandoned conscription. Along with a handful of other countries, Sweden stands out as a puzzling exception in this context. It is a place where conscription has not had its day. It has been radically reformed. In 1994 the old law on *värnplikt* (defence duty) was replaced with a new one on *totalförsvarsplikt* (Total-Defence-Duty) making residence the fundamental principle for conscription. All residents aged 16 to 70 – including women and foreign citizens who have lived more than five years in Sweden – now have a Total-Defence-Duty even if only Swedish men do active military service (still called *värnplikt*). Moreover, as part of the reforms “universality” (which never included women) has been abolished. Whereas 80% of Swedish men did active military service during the Cold War period, only 17% will do so in 2005-7 and if the military gets its way only 10% will in the future (Pliktverket 2003). These are far reaching reforms, but conscription has been upheld.

This paper suggests that this unorthodox Swedish policy is the result of the

¹ This paper is an idiosyncratic translation of the key idea in Kis (2003) to a discussion about Swedish *värnplikt*. The motivation for writing it comes from Pertti Joenimmi. Katrine DiBona’s research assistance has made the paper possible.

specific way that conscription has been understood and practised in Sweden. Its version of conscription, its *värnplikt*, has been a profoundly consensual, vague and malleable institution. This makes Sweden different from other countries that have kept conscription systems. Sweden is not captured by a specific understanding of conscription. Unlike France with its notion of a *service militaire republicain* (Lecomte 2005) or Germany with its fear of a historical repeat of anything resembling the Third Reich (Longhurst 2005), Sweden has no specific articulation that can be challenged and make it seem necessary to abolish conscription. Rather, the vagueness and taken for granted qualities of *värnplikt* has made radical reforms possible, including the recent introduction of the Total-Defence-Duty.²

The paper shows that this vague quality of consensus around the virtues of *värnplikt* is far from fortuitous. It reflects the necessity to accommodate two contradictory understandings of Sweden, Swedish politics, and Swedish society: that of Military Sweden and that of Political Sweden. Moving towards greater levels of abstraction has been a way of finding a common terrain, of establishing political neutrality (Kis, 2003). For *värnplikt*, the exact limits and nature of this common terrain were drawn first in the process of introducing *värnplikt* and then in the open conflicts surrounding its relations to key social and political institutions (individual rights/duties; social hierarchies and political order). As the final section argues, the current reforms of *värnplikt* have also been placed on this terrain. However, the reasons driving these reforms may also erode the terrain of neutrality as social transformations and the “globalization” of defence politics will make continued vagueness difficult.

² This is a theoretically interesting point since taken for granted institutions and discourses are mostly dealt with as hampering reform and change. This paper argues that the opposite has been the case in Sweden: the taken for granted nature of the *värnplikt* makes radical reform understandable.

1. Virtuous *värnplikt*: Building a Consensus

In their introduction to an interdisciplinary book reflecting on the role of conscription in Swedish society, Dahlström and Söderberg point out that there has been exceptional consensus around conscription in its modern form in Sweden (Dahlström and Söderberg 2002, pp. 8-9). The authors compare the duty to defend with duty to attend school or to vote in elections. Just as those not voting in elections, those refusing to do military service are “cheaters” in Sweden.³ Their presentation captures the strong consensus (at least at elite level) that has for long existed around Swedish conscription. This consensus has roots in the construction of *värnplikt* as virtuous for all Swedes. However, exactly why it is virtuous is rarely if ever spelled out. The reason is the existence of two contradictory grand traditions or discourses on why *värnplikt* is virtuous. Explicitly stating why *värnplikt* is virtuous would alienate one of these and undermine the broad consensus around the institution. Before making this argument, the importance of doing this kind of contextual analysis of how conscription is explained.

A. Varieties of Conscription

In much of the current debate about conscription and its obsolescence, conscription is restricted to its specifically modern form tied to modern warfare

³ “På samma sätt som soffliggare brukar ses som skolkare, har frikallande eller vapenfria ofta betraktats som smitare” (p. 9)

based on large standing armies: the requirement that all male citizens of a certain age do military service for a certain period of time. However, conscription has taken on a variety of forms, including in the modern era. This makes it essential to look at what the institution refers to in any given discourse and context if one is to discuss its functionality, or as is more relevant for this paper, the possibility of changing and reinventing it.

Finer tells us that conscription simply refers to “the common writing down of eligible names for the purpose of a ballot, with only the unlucky numbers having to serve” (Finer 1975: p. 94). Most historians adopt similarly broad definitions of conscription, insisting – as Finer does – on the element of a category of persons being registered as having the obligation to serve the military and some of these – the unlucky ones – then being picked to actively serve on the basis of some selection system. Conscription understood in this way has long roots. It was periodically practised by the Israelites of the old testament, by Egyptians, Assyrians, and by the Ancient Greeks (Møller 2002: 227). The Roman Empire periodically conscripted soldiers. In the period 49-32 B.C. it recruited an estimated 420.000 soldiers through conscription (Ericson 1999: p. 16). The Chinese Empire (e.g. Sung dynasty of the 10th Century) conscripted for a militia defence. The list could be prolonged but the point is not to underline the historical roots of conscription, but the variety of forms which it takes and contexts in which it has been practised. This is true also of modern conscription.

If the variety of modern forms of military recruitment referred to under the common label conscription are to be covered by the definition, it is a necessity to adopt a Finer like definition allowing for variation in both who is listed for service, who serves and on what terms. Even if citizenship is usually the key criteria for being listed, many modern conscription systems make exceptions for certain categories of nationals by exempting minorities, religious groups and specified

social categories from the military service (Krebs 2004; Krebs 2005). Inversely, many modern states have combined conscription systems with the hiring of non-citizens – *la légion étrangère* being a prime example. Finally, modern states have conscripted non-citizens under their rule as in the French and British colonial forces. A definition covering these modern systems hence needs to remain open in terms of who is conscriptable.

Similarly, even if the spread of modern conscription did go in pair with the development of mass armies, universal active service is not a distinguishing criterion. This is evident if one considers the standard classifications of conscription systems. Cohen's for example distinguishes three main modern forms of conscription (1985: chapter 3):

- The militia system, where conscription provides the bulk of the armed forces which are led and organised by conscripts usually organised on a local level. Switzerland exemplifies this system.
- The cadre/conscript system where conscription is paired with a professional cadre. Cohen uses post second world war France to illustrate this.
- The expansible system where conscripts are only selected when they are needed (e.g. US 1900-1940, interwar Germany and Sweden after 1925) and its cousin the selective service system where only the men needed to fill specific functions are selected (US 1917/1918).

Only in the first of these is universality an important element. The cadre conscript system as well as the expansible and selective systems are compatible with low levels of active services and high degrees of professionalization. All the systems allow for variation in the degree of professionalization of the armed forces and in the education and specialization they give their recruits.

Conscription systems can be compatible with armed forces of different forms and formats and relatedly conscription can take on different social functions. Conscription is a social institution with a variety of meanings. If the meaning conscription has in a given context can be transformed and adjusted so can conscription as a social institution (Leander 2004). This makes it essential to look at how conscription has been understood and practised in context.

B. The Swedish Variety of Conscription: A Duty to Defend (Värnplikt)

In 1901 Sweden adopted a law that formed the basis for military recruitment until 1995. The law settled that all men between 21 and 40 had a duty to defend (*värnplikt*). They were to take part in a basic education during 150 days and were expected to participate in two repeat exercises of maximum 30 days. The *värnplikt* was modified 18 times between 1901-1995. The age of men concerned, the number of men called to serve, the length of their service and the nature of their education were altered. In 1941 a new law on *värnplikt* was introduced (Tänneryd 2002, pp. 43-45). However, the exact content of these changes is less significant than understanding how *värnplikt* could be compatible with so many changes. Fundamental for this was that the Swedish *värnplikt* was construed as a virtuous institution.

The term *värnplikt* itself has connotations that facilitate a reading of it as virtuous. It is composed of the word *värna* and of the word *plikt*. *Värna* is a verb which means to defend, guard and protect but also to care, particularly used in the context of caring for one's home. *Värnlös* (without *värn*) means defenceless and unprotected and is mostly used in relation with unprotected women and children (1935). The use of *värna* implies that the attachment to the state parallels the

attachment to home and family. To guard in this caring way is itself virtuous. Moreover, the virtue of *värnplikt* is further increased by the reference *plikt*. Plikt is a duty. The idea of duty underlines that to guard and care for ones home family and in this case for Sweden is not something one can decide to do or not to do for personal reasons. It is a responsibility weighing on the citizen. Using duty – instead of service – underlines that the *värn* is not offered to someone else. It is has to be done for the nation and the state, but above all for the citizen himself.

The interpretation *värnplikt* in public debates and discourses has consolidated its status as a virtuous institution. The *värnplikt* has been seen as one of the essential and most explicit expressions of the link and loyalty between citizens and the state. By doing *värnplikt*, men show that they are virtuous and worthy citizens. *Värnplikt* is frequently referred to as the “main duty of the citizen” (“vår främsta medborgerliga plikt”⁴). Even more strongly, participation in the defence of the country is presented as a privilege. Following this line of thought *värnplikt* becomes not a burden, but a right and an honour (Granström 2002 p. 220). The relationship to *värnplikt* has been essential for the construction and confirmation of “normal” Swedish identities. It has fostered and reaffirmed specific, profoundly gendered, constructions of Swedish citizen (Kronsell and Svedberg 2005, forthcoming). It has provided Swedes with an opportunity to confirm their adherence to these constructions. Positioning *värnplikt* as central to citizenship and normality makes it logical to cast those who refuse or contest it as contemptible traitors to the national community.

The framing of *värnplikt* as a virtuous institution has been greatly facilitated by its construction as an institution with deep roots in Swedish traditions. The spontaneous self-defence of peasants in Sweden who went “*man ur huse*” (all men

⁴ All translations from Swedish are mine. For the development of this argument see in

out of the house, in the 14th -16th Centuries) to defend themselves is invoked as a precursor of contemporary *värnplikt*, underscoring that participation in defence has strong popular roots. Similarly, 1901 modern *värnplikt* is often presented as a natural outgrowth of the long tradition of conscription in Sweden (Törnquist 2002). For example, Gustav Adolph II built his army and marine on a conscription system established 1619. The church was charged with keeping track of all males. These were inspected and every tenth man required to serve. The system was replaced with *indelningsverket* (in 1680). *Indelningsverket* was also a hybrid form of conscription: territorially defined units (the size and nature of which changed over time) were required to provide soldiers (in numbers and on conditions that also evolved over time). The soldiers were usually volunteers attracted by the rewards, houses and land in particular (*soldattorp*)(Ericson 1999, pp. 44-84).

Finally, the presentation of *värnplikt* as profoundly anchored in Swedish traditions is facilitated by the sliding transition from earlier systems to the conscription system adopted in 1901. *Värnplikt* was introduced during the 19th Century with a series of laws that reformed the military recruitment system so that the traditional *indelningsverk* and *värkning* (hired soldiers) were complemented with conscripts. Historians will often date the introduction of the Swedish *värnplikt* back to one of these laws. For example Ericson (1999) dates it to the 1810 decision to adopt *värnplikt* on Gotland. Dahlström and Söderberg date it to the 1812 decision that all men between 20 and 25 might be recruited (2002, p. 19). Tänneryd dates it to the 1885 law stipulating that all men between 21 and 32 were *värnpliktiga* (2002, p. 27). The 1901 law did not invent *värnplikt*, it abolished older principles (*indelningsverket* and *värkning*).

This construction of Swedish *värnplikt* as virtuous does not to present all conscripts as virtuous nor does it suggest that all conscripts embrace their fate as

particular Granström (2002).

conscripts or for that matter that the real existing *värnplikt* is flawless. On the contrary, the clash between the duties and ideals on which *värnplikt* is based and the crass reality of conscript life is a classic theme in Swedish literature, film, and comic strips (Furhammar 2002; Jonsson 2002). It is certainly not fortuitous that the slang expression for doing *värnplikt* is to do *lumpen*, that is literally to do the rags. However, the construction does imply that *värnplikt* is in principle at an abstract level a virtuous social institutions. If the practice does not live up to this virtuosity, the practice and not the principle is to be criticised and altered.

C. One Värnplikt, Two Understandings

The construction of *värnplikt* as virtuous is not fortuitous but a necessity. A prerequisite for adopting (and later for preserving) *värnplikt* was the accommodation of opposing views on what purpose *värnplikt* was to serve and how exactly it was to do this. To unite these views around abstract notions of a duty to defend with positive connotations and a profound anchoring in national popular history was feasible. Specifying what was to be defended, which version of Sweden and of Swedish society the abstract *värnplikt* was to serve, would have revealed the incompatibility of views and created a profound rift in the consensus around *värnplikt*. Vagueness was a precondition for consensus.

The conflicting views on *värnplikt* can be grouped in two clusters: the political and the military views. These terms are borrowed from former US secretary of defence Arthur Schlesinger who when asked about his view on Sweden in the 1980s promptly replied “Which Sweden? The ‘Political Sweden’ or the ‘Military Sweden’ (Tunander 2001, p. 306). The Political Sweden Schesinger refers to is the social democratic Sweden of the government that he dealt with. The Military

Sweden is that of the armed forces. This division is useful for a stylized presentation of views that tend to go together throughout the 20th Century without implying that all politicians defended the constellation of views associated with “Political Sweden” or that the armed forces in their entirety defended the views of “Military Sweden. Rather it is important to recall that part of the armed forces ranges rather in Political Sweden in terms of their ideas and part of Political Sweden (the nationalist right in particular) fits better with Military Sweden.⁵ Moreover, these are stylized clusters. This means that all views in one cluster may not necessarily always go together, individuals may mix ideas from the two clusters, and they may of course shift between different clusters in any single argumentation and/or over time.⁶ This said they do capture key clusters of thoughts.

Military Sweden was essential in driving the gradual introduction of *värnplikt* in the 19th Century. The armed forces were increasingly unified in asking for conscription. Figures from the armed forces were central in the establishment of a group termed “Friends of the *värnplikt*” [*värnpliktens vänner* in 1875] which worked as an opinion forming association (Zetterberg 2002, p. 47) and Military Sweden was actively pursuing the issue in politics. The reason Military Sweden supported *värnplikt* are nicely summarised in a pamphlet on *värnplikt* written by major at the general chief of staff Lars Tingsten (1900). As one would expect Tingsten emphasises the needs of the armed forces. He insists that the armed forces need more men but especially a different quality of men. Tingsten argues (p. 10) that the armed forces cannot depend on the variation in the economy and in growth for their recruitment as they did in 19th Century Sweden. The unattractive

⁵ The by far best study of these relationships available is Tunander’s (2001).

⁶ For a more detailed discussion of the methodology behind this kind of discursive clusters in political analysis see (Wæver 2002; Hansen 2005).

conditions for those in the rank and file made military recruitment directly dependent on how the economy in general was faring (Tänneryd 2002). Tingsten also insists that the costs of the recruitment and education were too high and could be considerably diminished if conscription was adopted. In his words:

“The recruitment of an army’s rank and file by hiring is insufficient, uncertain and depending on the economic conjuncture. It is associated with high costs and can not be driven above a certain soon attained limit, even with considerable budgetary efforts” (Tingsten 1900, p. 8).

But more than this, Tingsten insists that *värnplik* is essential because “the conscripted army is recruited from all social groups and professions. It therefore also disposes over educated and intelligent people” (p. 27). The armed forces need to tap into the privileged part of the population which would not otherwise engage in the armed forces. Finally, even though Tingsten (understandably) does not mention it in his pamphlet, a strong reason for Military Sweden to support *värnplik* was that it paved the way for material improvements for the armed forces. Indeed, the introduction of *värnplik* in the 1880s led to a major state programme for the construction of the necessary infrastructure and in particular to the construction of barracks (*kaserneringsprogrammet*) which ran from 1890s to the 1920s. Moreover, housing for the upper levels, cafeterias etc. were called for, as was an expansion of the commanding ranks in the armed forces. The consequence was rising defence budgets. In 1901 a third of state spending went to the defence (Ericson 1999, pp. 109 and 113).

But Military Sweden also had an interest in *värnplik* for broader reasons. The late 19th Century was marked by the emergence of liberal politics and demands for constitutional democracy and universal suffrage. The military saw *värnplik* as a

significant opportunity to influence the public. Tingsten hence insists heavily on the importance of *värnplikt* as a site for general education. He tells his readers that “strictly speaking, the education of soldiers covers two separate but related elements: *education* and *military drills*” (p. 15 original emphasis). The military service should be a “school of obedience” furthering the recruits’ “love of the fatherland”. More broadly, Tingsten articulates a view with strong 21st Century resonance. He argues that *värnplikt* would be essential for combatting indifference about the armed forces and the fate of the soldiers within it. “When almost each family has one or more members in the ranks of the armed forces, this guarantees that political leaders will not capriciously or lightheartedly draw the sword, uselessly throwing the country into bellicose adventures” (p. 28).

It would have been impossible for Military Sweden to introduce *värnplikt* without support from Political Sweden. However, only the conservative right clearly supported the idea at the outset. The second largest party in the second chamber, peasant party (*Lantmannapartiet*), was hesitant. Deplorable conditions and particularly the harsh disciplinary and punishment methods used in the armed forces made *värnplikt* unpopular with the peasantry (Granström 2002, p. 32). Moreover, precisely because of the liberal politics the armed forces hoped to use the *värnplikt* against, support for *värnplikt* was weak. The bourgeois left and the liberal party were suspicious of an institution designed to strengthen their political opponents: the conservative and nationalist right close to the armed forces (Ericson 1999, p. 106). The social democratic party, founded in 1889, was originally openly opposed to *värnplikt*. Under Hjalmar Branting, the social democrats adopted what is often (misleadingly) called “defence nihilism” arguing that the national defence was an upper class matter and that spending on the armed forces should therefore not be a priority in peacetime (Molin 1974; Granström 2002, p. 40).

By 1901 Political Sweden was still not unambiguously in favour of *värnplikt*.

However, the idea had become admissible. The widespread conviction that the introduction of *värnplikt* would prompt the lifting of the remaining restrictions on voting rights was the key reason for this change. The link between the duty to defend and the right to vote made the liberals under the leadership of von Friesen to change their position on the issue. The same was true of the social democrats. “A man, a gun, a vote” was the slogan that Per Albin Hansson used in the paper of the social democratic youth arguing for *värnplikt* in 1901. As for the peasant party it remained split. But with the broad acceptance of a necessary link between universal conscription and universal suffrage, positions changed sufficiently for *värnplikt* to be adopted by parliament with narrow margins. The 1901 law was pushed through by general lieutenant Jesper Crusebjörn who was minister of territorial defence with the argument that the law might not be good, but it was better than the existing alternative (Ericson 1999, p. 108).⁷ There can be little doubt, though, that the reasons the right and the left thought that the law was acceptable diverged sharply.

The gap in viewpoints deepened and widened as also Political Sweden and particularly the social democratic party and the peasant party began to see wider political advantages in the *värnplikt*. The Swedish armed forces were profoundly marked by class differences (Ericsson 1983, p. 232). The social democrats and peasant party realised that *värnplikt* might be used to counter this and to democratize the armed forces (Guillemot 2005). The peasant party began to argue that if also privileged social groups were forced into the military, the disciplinary practices would have to change (Granström 2002, p.30). Related to this, Political Sweden began to agree with Military Sweden that universal and compulsory *värnplikt* was a potent site for education. Needless to say, their view on what the

⁷ There was of course no automatic link between this and universal suffrage. Restrictions on male suffrage were lifted only in 1909 (and on female suffrage in 1921).

content of this education of conscripts diverged starkly from that of Military Sweden. The emphasis was on education that would enable and encourage citizens

1. Two understandings of *värnpliktens* relation to basic social institutions

	Military Sweden	Zone of Explicit Consensus	Political Sweden
Individual Rights	Strictly limited by military discipline and needs	Subordinate to state interests	Promotion of rights awareness including within the military
Social Hierarchies	Encouragement of participation of educated elite and promotion of gifted individuals	Social hierarchies should be of limited import- ance in armed forces. Promotion of mobility central	Active promotion of social mobility inside and outside the armed forces
Politics	Useful check on political ambitions/ development; guarantee against indifference	Central for democratic rule	Useful check on political ambitions/ developments within the armed forces
Key Concern	Military effectiveness	Essential for the defence of Sweden	Popular anchoring (<i>Folkförankring</i>)

to be aware of their rights. It was the opposite of the obedience dear to major Tingsten.

Finally, as the social democrats developed the vision of Sweden as a *Folkhem* (people's home) in the 1930s, they began to promote *värnplikt* as a pivotal institution. *Folkhemmet* was to be constructed by a conscious elimination of the differences and problems stemming from social class relations and even more ambitiously, its opponents claimed, by the elimination of individuality *tout court* (Larsson 1994). For the social democrats *värnplikt* became one of the sites where this vision of the *Folkhemmet* could be promoted, actively constructed and of course defended. The consequence was an understanding of *värnplikt*, its organisation and the activities of the recruits that was not only different but contradictory to that of Military Sweden. An emphasis on obedience, abstract fatherland love, and military effectiveness was supplanted by an emphasis on social rights, equality, social mobility and the importance of ensuring political control over the military.

The more articulate Political Sweden became in its understanding of *värnplikt* and its virtues, the more evident it became this understanding was on a collision course with the understanding of Military Sweden. The two understandings converged around the conclusion that *värnplikt* was virtuous, but they reached that conclusion for profoundly different reasons (see summary table). The consequence was a tacit consensus that it was wiser not to discuss (or amass information about) which of these visions of *värnplikt* the real existing *värnplikt* was approximating and in general what measures should be taken for it to better correspond to either of the two visions. This tacit consensus around an abstract notion of *värnplikt* was strengthened through the clashes in the first quarter of the twentieth Century as the terrain of consensus and political neutrality was staked out.

2. Vague *värnplikt*: Reproducing the Consensus in Conflict Situations

The two basic understandings of why *värnplikt* was virtuous, what kind of role it was to play in society and what kind of Sweden it was designed to defend were so diverging that it would have been strange if Military and Political Sweden had not clashed over the fundamentals of the institution. There were conflicts about how *värnplikt* related to individual rights, to social hierarchies and to political democracy. These conflicts might have led to the victory of one of the two understandings of the *värnplikt*. However, even though the conflicts tipped the balance in one direction (in favour of Political Sweden), the more striking outcome was that the conflicts resulted in a reinstatement of the zone of consent, a return to a vaguely termed *värnplikt*. The conflicts underlined – to military and Political Sweden alike – that vagueness was a *sine qua non* for *värnplikt*. This process is of essence for understanding the concentration of open conflict around *värnplikt* to the early 19th Century. It is also of essence for understanding the vagueness of the Swedish *värnplikt*. The power-struggles in this process – and not (as argued by Körlof 2002, p. 153) the “interesting trust-based link between the nation and the military” created by the mobilization around the first and second world wars – explains the consensus around *värnplikt*. This section looks at the three major conflicts in this struggle over how *värnplikt* should relate to basic social institutions.

A. The Treatment of Conscientious Objectors: A Conflict over Individual Rights

Conscription conflicts with individual rights. The freedom to decide how to spend time, where to go, whom to work for, what to think and how to practice religion

are infringed on by conscription. The question of how conscription systems should relate to rights is therefore not *if* it infringes on rights. It does. The question is how far it is allowed to do so and, relatedly who can be exempted from the duties of conscription. When *värnplikt* was introduced in early 19th Century Sweden, this discussion evolved around exemptions on the basis of wealth or social status. The issue was whether or not the capacity to hire a replacement (*lejning*) or paying a fixed fee (*friköp*), employment in the state or university enrollment should constitute bases for exemption. However, by the time of the 1901 law, these issues were no long central. The right to hire a replacement was abolished in 1860 and the right to buy oneself free in 1872. The special training of students between 1813-1869 (*studentbeväringen*) had ceased and students were training with other conscripts even if they continued to enjoy a special status until the 1941 law. The debate therefore revolved around the extent to which “reasons of conscience” could constitute a valid basis for exemption. In this debate, the two Swedens found themselves on opposite sides.

The consensus was that in principle exemptions should be limited.⁸ Universal conscription was to be the norm with as few exceptions as possible. For different reasons, Military and Political Sweden converged around an understanding of *värnplikt* as fundamental to state interests. According to teaching material used for first cohorts of conscripts:

“Not to wish to protect ones home, country, hearth and freedom to rule oneself must be considered cowardly and fatherlandless [...] Each good citizen must see in the completion of the *värnplikt* only the highest of duties and shall therefore, in order to fulfil it, complete the *värnplikt* with

⁸ This section owes much to Görel Granström’s (2002) discussion of the topic.

willingness and happiness. To try to escape it, is unmanly and shows insufficient sense of duty” (quoted in Granström 2002, p. 217).

Reluctance to recognise and deal with conscientious objection was strong. No special provision was made for those who would refuse to do their military service in the 1901 law. Rather the law was adopted on the basis of the widely shared opinion that *värnplikt* was a fundamental duty of ALL (male) citizens. The discussion that did take place evolved around adequate punishments. There was discussion about the extent to which refusing military service would justify depriving those refusing the *värnplikt* of their rights as citizens and more generally of their social rights (for example their right to work for the state). Similarly, a recurring issue was whether those refusing to complete their *värnplikt* were to be punished in prison or placed in educational institutions. The former would mark the severity of the crime. The latter could correct the misunderstanding objectors were assumed to have about their rights and duties as citizens.

Strict adherence to universality proved practically untenable. Already in 1902 troop-commanders were given the possibility to assign conscientious objectors to civil rather than military tasks. In 1912 the possibility of objecting to military service on reasons other than religion was opened, in 1920 a civil service was introduced and in 1925 the right to conscientious objection was finally enshrined. This redefinition of universality resulted from the confrontation of the two basic views on *värnplikt* and its role in society. Although Military and Political Sweden agreed on the general principle that exemptions should be limited and subordinate to state interests, they diverged on the how to translate this principle to practice.

Military Sweden was strongly opposed to opening up for conscientious objection. It had no difficulties admitting that the physically ill should be exempted. They were not needed by the military any way. But Military Sweden

could not agree to conscientious objection. Giving into the demands of the conscientious objectors – those with a sensitive conscience (*samvetsömma*) as they were called – would erode the state’s defence capacities. Such concessions would trigger an avalanche of unacceptable refusals masquerading as conscientious objections. The root problem was that for Military Sweden few refusals were acceptable. Conscientious objection was considered either a form of mental illness – stemming from excessively sensitive nerves – or an expression of erroneous doctrines and insufficient education. Military Sweden therefore spent time and effort on showing for instance that religiously motivated conscientious objection was grounded in a faulty reading of the bible. The belief that conscientious objection had roots in erroneous doctrines, made strictly universal *värnplikt* seem even more essential. It could correct the misconceptions (Granström 2002, pp. 79-82). In 1900 the chef of the regiment of *Värmland* sums up the position when he argues that

“Conscientious objection could hardly count as something other than an expression of such mental illness and distorted understanding of the citizenship duties, that if it is not with fully effective means suffocated at its roots, must, where the circumstances occur, be feared to become a poison, whose effects cannot be arrested by rules of punishment or other palliative measures” (quoted in Granström 2002, p. 71).

Political Sweden held a less stringent view on what individual rights might justify exemption. Fundamentally, Political Sweden thought of *värnplikt* as an important institution for promoting not only nationalist values and military discipline, but also as a site of civic education where awareness about rights (as well as duties) were essential. Even if they hence embraced *värnplikt*, their position on

conscientious objection was less clear-cut. On the one hand, they believed in the importance of drawing everyone into the *värnplikt* as a means to promote social mobility, political change and to anchor the armed forces. On the other hand, Political Sweden could not ignore the many contradictions this desire created in terms of the individual the *värnplikt* was understood to promote. Moreover, the consideration that the armed forces sometimes (perhaps even usually) did not provide the kind of civic education favoured by Political Sweden made the position even more ambiguous.

The bulk of those claiming a right to conscientious objection were from the constituencies of Political Sweden. The liberal party was close to the free-church movement from which many of the conscientious objectors came.⁹ Liberals therefore played a central role in the early debate about conscientious objection in Sweden. In 1898, the liberal deputy Jacob Byström tried (but failed because of resistance from the conservatives) to open up for a civil service in peace-time. Byström argued that there was no reason to force religious citizens to do military tasks and punish them when they refused in times of peace. Particularly, since paragraph 16 of the Swedish Constitution guaranteed freedom of religious practice as long as this practice did not interfere with peace and order. In striking contrast to the presentation made by Military Sweden, Byström insisted that those claiming a right to conscientious objection were respectable citizens (Granström 2002, p. 62). Even if this early attempt to introduce conscientious objection failed, it was essential for the adoption of the 1902 circular and the liberals actively continued to push the issue in parliament.

The other main source of arguments in favour of a right to conscientious objection was the socialist/ social democratic party. Even if the party line was

⁹ Since the reformation Sweden has had a state church. It is only over the last decades that this church has been legally separated from the state. The state church has been rivalled by a variety of protestant movements collectively referred to as “free churches”.

positive to *värnplik*, it had close ties to an anti-militarist left which was not. The party itself had advocated an anti-militaristic stance in the recent past and the anti-militarist tradition continued to be strongly represented at the base. The women's section and the 'Västerbottningar' (from northern Sweden) continued to define themselves against the armed forces well after the direction of the party had shifted its position (Molin 1974). Moreover, the armed forces often openly came out against the political left. This made a restrictive view on conscientious objection problematic. Instead, the social democrats pushed non-religious conscientious objection onto the agenda in 1912. But even after this, the armed forces systematically treated political objectors (and here the left was dominant) more harshly than they did religious objectors (Granström 2002, p. 212). The social democrats therefore played a central role in the legalisation of conscientious objection in 1925. Per Albin Hansson pushed the winning argument in the 1925 debate. He pointed out that treating the objectors mildly need not necessarily stand against the interests of the state. In 1925 the armed forces went through a major reform and major cuts. The reforms meant that a considerable share of the conscripts (25%) were not to be called in. In this context, it was easy to argue that more lenient conscientious objection rules did not run against national interests. State interests had been redefined not to require strictly universal *värnplik*.

The principle of conscientious objection was accepted. The settlement of the conflict surrounding it is emblematic of how conflicts surrounding *värnplik* have been settled. It was a partial victory for Political Sweden and its less stringent understanding of universality. However, its most striking aspect is that it was presented as (and understood to be) in conformity with an overall consensus on the *värnplik*. Per Albin Hansson did not argue that individual rights should be extended at the expense of state defence interests nor did he tackle the military arguments about the risk of contagion and the madness/immorality of objectors. Instead, he argued that a circumscribed right to conscientious objection was

compatible with (but subordinate to) state interests. This made the settlement acceptable to Military Sweden. It could be argued that conscientious objection actually enhanced military efficiency. The zone of explicit consensus could be upheld and reinstated. Half a century of debate and heated disagreement between military and Political Sweden could be swept away and forgotten by a stroke of redefinition: national interest and conscientious objection were no longer incompatible. Conscientious objection could now become part of both understandings of *värnplikt*. It ceased to be contentious. Those who tried to make it contentious could be rejected as extremists (Bergström 1964; Hammarberg 1965).

B. Associational Rights in the Armed Forces: A Conflict over Social Hierarchies

The question of how conscription should relate to social hierarchies is a second area where views on conscription diverge profoundly. A widely shared understanding of conscription is that it should work to facilitate social mobility and integration (Krebs 2004). Since it covers the entire male population in a state, it is a potent site for education. Even more concretely, conscription can be viewed as opening career paths and possibilities for ambitious and talented young men who would not otherwise have access to these. The education received in prestigious military educational institutions can give access not only to careers within the armed forces but also outside them (for examples from most European countries see Abrahamsson 1972). However, this drive to support social mobility clashes with established hierarchies. Scratching the surface of the consensus about social mobility, one is bound to find contradictory ideas regarding of how far and by what means conscription should be used to promote social mobility. This is also the case in Sweden.

The *värnplikt* understandings of Military and Political Sweden converged around the significance of *värnplikt* in limiting the role of social hierarchies and promoting social mobility. First, the potential of *värnplikt* for promoting education was an important argument in favour of its adoption (Guillemot 2005). In some parts of the country, the issue and ambition was simply ensure literacy in and understanding of Swedish. This was particularly true of the *värnplikt* in the Finish speaking northern Sweden. A bi-lingual instruction book for the infantry was published to encourage the learning of Swedish. The book (*Undervisning för infanteristen / Opetus Jalkaväelle*) had Swedish instructions on one page and Finish instructions mirroring them on the facing page. The situation is described by Karl Alfred Henning, a reserve officer from Stockholm placed in Norrbotten in the early 1900s:

“I well remember the first time I lay in a tent with that battalion and how strange I thought it was not to understand a word of what was said by ones own troop. Eventually one learnt the most common phrases and commands. In general, it was ones task to ensure that the troop used the *värnplikt* time to learn Swedish” (quoted in Ericson 1999, p. 114).

Moreover, both understandings of *värnplikt* held that “quality” in the armed forces would rise if gifted young men were promoted. Lastly, it was clear that for Military and Political Sweden alike, the *värnplikt* in and of itself was considered to further social mobility simply because it increased the need of commanders (particularly lower level) and hence opened up career opportunities. However, the two Swedens held diverged on what in detail it meant to promote social mobility. This clash crystallised around the debate about associational rights in the armed forces.

For Military Sweden, the move to limit the impact of social hierarchies was required for military effectiveness. A primary reason for pushing *värnplikt* in the

first place was to force educated and socially privileged people into the armed forces and hence increase the quality of the men the army disposed of. In conservative circles upper class belonging and quality/intelligence were synonymous (Ericsson 1983, p. 233). Military Sweden also wished to open the recruitment of officers to individuals from all social classes. However, for Military Sweden recruitment had to be strictly competence based. It did not require revisions of the internal recruitment norms, of the military education, or of the links between the upper and the lower commands. For Military Sweden the end of exemptions grounded in social privilege and introduction of *värnplikt* were sufficient for this purpose. They ensured that gifted individuals could be integrated into the system. Characteristically, in 1909 the conservative minister of war O.B. Malm declared that the “officer-career is open to all social classes. Birth and fortune add nothing, all that counts is that the required competence” (quoted in Ericsson 1983, p. 232).

The reason Malm made this declaration was obviously that the view of Military Sweden was contested. Political Sweden was convinced that class origins were essential for success in military careers. Indeed, the armed forces widely held to be a place where class differences were more marked and central than in society at large. To Political Sweden, Malm’s statement “must have seemed absurd” (Ericsson 1983, p. 232). The increased politicization of social issues and workers rights logically also affected the armed forces. Pay and material conditions was one bone of contention. Contrary to the upper commanding ranks in the armed forces, the lower commanding ranks had seen their status, pay and career worsen with the *värnplikt* (Ericson 1999).

More centrally though, Political Sweden including the lower ranks within these forces were decreasingly willing to accept the idea of promotion of gifted individuals on conditions established by the conservative armed forces. Rather, as elsewhere in society, they were increasingly concerned with more far reaching

revisions of the general conditions and opportunities of socially disadvantaged groups and correspondingly less willing to accept that the armed forces should stand untouched by the kind of democratization that was taking place elsewhere in society. Lower ranking commanders and even conscripts demanded not only better material conditions but also a say within the armed forces (e.g. over punishments). The consequence was a serious clash between the political and military Sweden regarding the extent to which a genuine reduction of the impact of social hierarchies in the armed forces required working against the established hierarchies, and more specifically whether it required giving the lower commanding levels (and later the rank and file) associational rights.

Military Sweden opposed the idea that associational rights were called for. Already in 1906 it tried to limit the possibilities of such rights by introducing new rules prohibiting “the incitement to mutiny, violence or revolt” (Ericson 1999, p.236). In spite of these efforts the lower commanding ranks began to organise by forming first the SUOF (*Sveriges Underofficersförbund*; Sweden’s non-commissioned officers union) in 1907 and SUbR (*Svenska Underbefällets Riksförbund*: the national union of non-commissioned commanders) in 1908. Military Sweden did its best to counter this development and entered into open conflict with Political Sweden. Colonel Erik Oxenstierna attempted to forbid the associational activities of lower ranking commanders. He pointed to the military regulation which forbade discussions among members of the armed forces of issues that “may develop fear, despair or discontent”. Salary and general conditions were listed among the examples of such issues (Ericson 1999, p. 226). When a parliamentary commission was appointed on the initiative of the liberal party leader Karl Staaf and under the direction of the liberal party member Erik Palmstierna to establish whether or not Oxenstierna’s position was tenable, the chief of staff published a general directive forbidding members of the armed forces to give information to members of parliament (Ericsson 1983, p. 228).

Oxenstierna publicly stated his belief in the importance of preventing the “demokratische Untriebe” harming the rest of society from infecting also the armed forces (Ericsson 1983, p. 232).

The solution was characteristic of the handling of conflicts over *värnplik*. A long legal process ensued regarding the legality of the attempt to limit associational rights in the armed forces by the commanding ranks in general and Oxenstierna in particular. The outcome was that Oxenstierna and other senior figures were accused of no wrongdoing. But at the same time the process established limited associational rights in the armed forces and SOUF and SubR could continue to operate. The full extension of general strike and negotiating rights came only in 1966 with the extension of these rights to all state employees. A body covering the conscripts nationally (not at regiment level) was established only in 1970 (*värnpliktskongressen* originally *värnpliktskonferensen*) (Ericson 1999, pp. 227-228). In 1908 a commission was set up to tackle discontent in the ranks of the armed forces. It was given permanent status in 1915 under the name the *militiemannaämbetet* (MO) (Ericsson 1983, p. 235; Ericson 1999, pp. 226-227).

This should not be misunderstood as a victory for Political Sweden. The associational rights were limited in theory and of even more limited significance in practice. Military Sweden continued – albeit more subtly – to counter any effective influence from the lower ranks in the armed forces. It resisted overall reforms and particularly any general reforms challenging social hierarchies in the military. The established organisations and MO were active at the local level and came to focus on un-controversial issues – in particular relating to the quality of the food – where lower and upper ranks could converge (Ericson 1999, p. 226). Political Sweden acquiesced to these practices contenting itself with a formal recognition of political rights. The consensus understanding was reinstated. At a high level of abstraction all could claim to agree that social hierarchies should not be significant in the *värnplik*. Political Sweden could continue to claim that *värnplik* was actively an

institution promoting social mobility and ensuring the “popular anchoring of the armed forces”. Military Sweden could emphasise that *värnplikt* was an optimal recruitment system which attracted talented individuals from all social classes into the army which in turn offered them attractive career opportunities.

C. The Relation to Internal Order: A Conflict over Politics

The relation of *värnplikt* to politics is a final issue where the two views on Swedish *värnplikt* have clashed head on only to reinstate a consensus around an abstract and necessarily vague *värnplikt*. The overall consensus has been that *värnplikt* is important in a democratic state. However, different arguments can (and usually do) underlie claims of this type (for an overview of these see Skauge 2002). Sweden confirms this. For Political Sweden *värnplikt* ensured that ideas and developments in the rest of society penetrated the armed forces and made them supportive of these. Inversely, Military Sweden’s version of *värnplikt* was that the institution enabled the armed forces to resist societal developments threatening the political order. For Military Sweden, *värnplikt* gave the military control over politics and society; for Political Sweden it gave politics and society control over the military. The two views result in opposed understandings of how the military institution and *värnplikt* should relate to politics. These views have openly clashed over way the armed forces have used *värnplikt* to intervene with politics in Sweden.

First, Military Sweden saw the *värnplikt* as an important source of troops that could be used for interventions in defence of the political order. Indeed, at the time of the introduction of *värnplikt*, during the 19th Century one of the legal reasons to use military troops was to “keep order”. Hence between 1886-1899 4 military interventions to secure order were made in an average year (Guillemot 1997, p. 60). Most of these were uncontroversial and concerned fire extinctions and the

like. But the armed forces were also used against strikers. In late 19th Century Sweden the legitimacy of strikes was contested as were the rights of striking workers. Parts of society saw them as upsetting the social and political order and hence warranting the use of military force. The strikers obviously did not share that view. The result was that army interventions with strikers were highly contested. Among the more noted such interventions is the 1879 intervention with 510 land troops and 270 marines to force strikers back to their work at a sawing mill in Sundsvall (at the request of the mill owner) .

The 1901 law did not cancel the use armed force for the sake of political order. On the contrary conscripts could be used to “silence revolts” (*stillande av uppror*). The so called “revolt paragraph” (*upprorsparagrafen*) served to justify repeated interventions of the armed forces against striking workers in the tense first quarter of the 20th Century. The most commonly noted interventions by the armed forces are:

- the 1909 massive mobilization in reaction to the major social tensions and striking (the *Storstrejkk* or big strike).
- the 1917 intervention on Seskarö where food shortages had led to “wild” (outside the rationing system) buying of food.
- the 1931 military intervention in Ådalen against striking workers.

To Political Sweden these interventions were unjustified. Particularly to the social democrats struggling to establish union and strike rights, they were an expression of the bias of existing laws in general and of the military in particular. Following the 1909 interventions, the social democrats tried to remove the revolt paragraph against conservative opposition. However, fear of social upheaval slowed change. The tone of the debate is exemplified by admiral Arvid Lindman who in 1912 accused Hjalmar Branting in parliament for driving the issue only because

the “1909 military intervention had stopped his secret plans” (implicit to overthrow the legitimate government) (quoted in Guillemot 1997, p. 63). In 1925 the social democrats obtained the removal of the contested paragraph. However, the army could still be called upon “when the defence of the kingdom or its security otherwise required it” (Guillemot 1997, p. 73). As subsequent interventions showed the 1925 redefinition could not prevent political use of the armed forces. In Ådalen the armed forces were called in to ensure the safety of strike breakers at the Marmaverken. The intervention left five people dead. In the wake of Ådalen followed a heated public debate and a profoundly divided public opinion which led to the removal of the remnants of the revolt paragraph.

Surprisingly, though perhaps not in the Swedish context, important sections of Military Sweden welcomed this outcome. It argued that lifting the ambiguity on the role of the military in national politics reestablished the necessary distinction between military and police as well as the unity within the armed forces. In the words of *Ny Militär Tidskrift*¹⁰ “there is all reason to remain vigilant regarding communist activities. However, the armed forces must be relieved of doing police duties. It must be entirely kept out of internal party strives and class conflicts” (Guillemot 1997, p. 66).

The other ways Military Sweden understood *värnplikt* to be a guarantee of political order are less open and have been subject to lesser publicly aired controversy, but are certainly no less contentious. For Military Sweden *värnplikt* was the basis for the recurrent secret military planning for internal political emergencies. Such planning seems to have been rather extensive. In periods of social unrest the military made more or less detailed intervention plans which were known only to the trusted sections of the armed forces. Hence, the periods

¹⁰ This “New Military Review” was dominated by younger officers who were often explicitly critical of the old guard.

surrounding 1909 big strike, the 1917 hunger-strikes, the 1918 red scare, and the growing social activism of the 1920s all led to the elaboration of secret military plans for upholding political order and democracy. These plans were formulated so that they would involve voluntary military organizations. For example, the plans for Stockholm involved *Stockholms Skyddskår* (The Defence Brigade of Stockholm) in 1917 and “*Stockholms Luftförsvars Frivilliga Beredskaps Förening*” (The Mobilization Association of Volunteers of the Air-Defence of Stockholm) organised by general lieutenant Bror Munck in the 1920s (Guillemot, 1997, pp. 75-78). *Värnplikt* was an important part of this emergency planning. Conscripts were to be used in the planned operations. They were also an important source of recruitment for the increasingly central para-military organizations on which the planning relied.

Third, the *värnplikt* gave Military Sweden an instrument of direct control over the political activities of the male Swedish population. The military kept registers over political activists on the left and partly also on the right. At the outbreak of the second world war these registers were used in combination with the registers of the security police and the *värnplikt* became a direct form of political control. 3000 to 3580 Swedish men were “warplaced” (*krigsplacerade*) for security reasons in some ten so called “labour companies” (*arbetskompanier*). Most of these men were alleged communists but some Nazi-sympathisers seem to have been included. The most well known work company was Storsienlägret where the recruits were put to build roads. But there was also the Naartjärvi company an “isolation company” placed between Sangis and Haparanda and a couple of smaller companies located in central Sweden (Västergötland and Härjedalen). The controversy over these companies grew and they were dismantled in early 1942 (Ericson 1999, p. 239). However, they did underline that the *värnplikt* constituted a potent instrument for registering information about the political activities of the recruits and even for controlling them physically in case of need.

The use of the *värnplikt* for secret military planning and intervention in national politics jarred with Political Sweden's understanding of the institution. In fact, Political Sweden was targeted by these activities. Controlling social unrest and strikes involved the systematic gathering of information on communist groups. From a conservative perspective it also involved countering the development and influence of the social democrats. The growing influence of the party, including its influence on the state apparatus must have appeared threatening to much of Military Sweden. Particularly, as pointed out by Guillemot (1997, p. 76) the appointment of the social democrat Per Albin Hansson to the post of minister of war in the 1920s was "something unheard to the conservative forces". It is therefore far from certain that Political Sweden was informed about the secret plans of the armed forces or about the full extent of the political registers. Part of these registers and plans probably were established with the avail, and perhaps even at the request of, (part of) the government (Guillemot 1997, p. 77). However, information was probably not extended to all those who were entitled to it. For example about the emergency planning for interventions in the Stockholm area in the late 1920s early 1930 (with the support of the *Munckska kåren*) Guillemot writes:

"the organization was known to the police and at least parts of the government. But it was unknown to the larger part of the public[...] All planning was strictly secret and its is an interesting question how much was known about this planning outside the military circle (1997, p. 78).

By contrast to the loud public discussions around the other conflicts that have just been discussed there is strikingly little strongly termed public confrontation over the use of *värnplikt* in secret military planning and the control of political activism. The explanation might be that these activities were undertaken with the

complicity of (some parts of) Political Sweden. However, a more plausible explanation is that confrontation could not have resulted in a reinstatement of the zone of consensus. Because Political Sweden was directly targeted, there could be no compromise on the use of *värnplikt* to ensure political order. Open discussion would have resulted in a clear victory for either of the two versions on why *värnplikt* was important to protect democracy. Instead of risking such confrontation, the social democratic establishment preferred a conciliatory stance. The emphasis was on the long term construction of trust relations. As Per Albin Hansson explained: “the democratisation of the defence is more a question of spirit than of rules. This spirit grows best out of a mutual trust” (quoted Zetterberg 2002, p. 61).

The non-confrontation over military secret contingency planning and attempts to control political activism is therefore significantly similar to the confrontation over other issues: it allowed the upholding of a vaguely formulated consensus around the virtues of the *värnplikt*. Looking back at these big debates over the *värnplikt* and its relationship to Swedish individuals, its societal hierarchies and its political system the most striking aspect is that each debate seems to have reinstated a consensus that *värnplikt* continued to be virtuous. It did so each time by moving up to a terrain of vagueness and abstraction where the Military and Political stories about the virtues of *värnplikt* could meet. It might even be argued that the contours of the terrain were delineated more sharply through each conflict. They underscored that detailed formulations triggered conflict. This may explain the contrast between the numerous, detailed, often critical accounts of *lumpen* in Swedish film and literature and dearth of factual information and public debate about this obviously central social institution. This dearth seems to have increased over time. In the post war period, the *värnplikt* has surfaced occasionally. However, with the quintessential exception of the discussion about women’s rights and obligations, this discussion has not touched the relationship between *värnplikt* and

major social institutions. Similarly, the level of detailed factual information on *värnpliktens* relationship to major social institutions seems to have decreased over time. For example, data on the social origins of the recruits both to the file and rank and to the higher positions ceased to be collected in the 1980s (Lövgren 2005).

3. Enduring *värnplikt*: Confirming the Consensus

The vagueness surrounding the virtues of *värnplikt* is pivotal to any explanation of the endurance of conscription in Sweden at present. Consensus that *värnplikt* is virtuous is a reason to uphold it; the vagueness around why it is virtuous makes it possible to do so without debate. This applies also to the latest reforms including the adoption of the 1994 law on “Total-Defence-Duty”. These reforms are so extensive that Lieutenant-colonel Pettersson does not hesitate to tell his readers that “if by *värnplikt* we understand that a large majority of the male population receives a longer military education, then *värnplikt* has de facto been abolished” (Pettersson 2002, p. 179). However, these reforms have passed relatively unnoticed and without significant questioning of the virtues of *värnplikt* as such. The revamped *värnplikt* has been integrated with both the Military and the Political understandings of why *värnplikt* is virtuous.

A. Challenges to Swedish Conscription

Sweden has not escaped the challenges cited to spell the demise of conscription as a viable military recruitment system elsewhere (Joenniemi 2005, forthcoming). In Sweden (as elsewhere) the overwhelming consensus is that the time of standing

mass armies has past and with it universal conscription. But in Sweden this consensus is not understood as a challenge to *värnplik*. It merely calls for reforms.

The conviction that transformations in the nature of warfare makes universal conscription dysfunctional is widespread in Sweden. One reason is the altered “threat picture”. In a globalized world threats come from terrorists, failed states and network wars. Therefore international interventions is replacing territorial defence as the key military task. The military therefore needs to become more apt at collaborating internationally and better at the non-classical tasks (often closer to policing than to conventional military operations) central to peacekeeping/peace-enforcement (Bratt 2003; Försvarmakten Högkvarteret 2004). Conscripts are ill-suited for these. Governments are unwilling to send conscripts abroad. Moreover, the education needed for conscripts to be operative in these operations is too long and costly for it to be feasible and economically viable. More generally, conventional armed forces may not be appropriate for these operations which makes inflating their numbers with conscripts illogical (The Study Group on Europe's Security Capabilities 2004).

A second reason to sound the bell for conscription is the technological changes in warfare. The so called “revolution in military affairs” has involved a greater reliance on technologically sophisticated arms and a related transformation of military strategy. This form of warfare requires fewer, but more specialised, soldiers. The big numbers granted by conscription are no longer necessary (Schméder 1998). They impose high costs on strained military budgets that have been shrinking since the end of the Cold War. From this perspective universal conscription appears as an expensive hangover from the past surviving by institutional inertia and pressure from vested interests. However, even if these technical and budgetary concerns overshadow other issues in the discussion. Conscription can be reformed to provide conscripts of the kind and quantity needed as Sweden and other cases show.

The real challenge to the military service stems from the disenchantment with the old social meanings of conscriptions and the difficulty of inventing new ones (Leander 2003; and 2004 for a detailed version of this argument). The social meaning of modern conscription was intimately tied to a territorially and temporally specific and bounded understanding of politics, society, and individuality that have lost much of their lustre. The “individualization” of society is wreaking havoc with simplistic ideas of the military as a site for the formation of male identities. Instead the “post-modern” military has to accommodate a steadily growing variety of male (and female) identities and ambitions (Moskos 2000). It is also undermining the idea that military service is a duty paid in exchange for citizen rights. Most members of “post-military society” (Shaw 1991) believe that their rights are anchored elsewhere than in their service to a military institution (Mjøset and van Holde 2002).

Moreover, the societal role of the military as a key integrative institution, supporting social mobility, rings increasingly hollow. Social mobility and education is provided by other (and many would say more appropriate) institutions including public schools and universities. Even more damaging, the boundaries of the society to be integrated are fuzzy. The fiction of unitary nations is difficult to uphold when a growing number of people identify with societies and polities that have boundaries different from those of the state. The adequacy of assuming that the boundaries of the social and political community to coincide with the boundaries of the state is sharply contested. Finally, for most Western democracies the concern that conscription is needed to anchor the military in politics is fading away. The need to prevent military coups or the importance of conscripts as a protection against social revolutions are distant preoccupations, if they figure at all.

Conscription, in other words, is suffering from difficulties similar to that of many other modern social institutions: it is clear enough their function and meaning are not persuasive. It is patently unclear what could replace them. This is

not to say that the world is without meaning (as does Laïdi 1998) but to underline the growing weight of global (Foucauldian) governance in shaping social institutions and meaning (Bayart 2004). Imagining how to deal with the uncertainties this creates requires thinking politics beyond the outside/inside divide, ridding oneself of “the matrix” structuring political thinking (Walker 1993; Huysmans 2003). We are not good at this type of thinking or as Bauman phrases we lack the political imagination (Bauman 1999). However, there are a number of routes circumventing the challenge. One can contend that the world has not changed – as the Finns seem to do with a considerable degree of success by insisting on the importance for them (independently of how much the rest of the world changes) of a strong, conventional territorial defence (Laitinen 2005). Alternatively, one can insist that conscription is of such overriding significance that it must be kept. This is key in Germany (Longhurst 2005). A last alternative is to deny – or more accurately fail to see – the challenges to the social meaning of conscription. This is only an option if conscription is so nebulously defined that there can be no jarring between the social meaning imputed to the institution and actual social practice. Swedish *värnplikt* fulfils this criteria.

B. Revamping the värnplikt in Sweden

Swedish *värnplikt* has been profoundly reformed. Following the end of the cold war, Sweden did the same as most other countries. It reviewed its defence policies to adjust to the changes in the international context. Interestingly, and in contrast to the situation in most other countries though, these reforms have come without challenging conscription. In the ensuing reforms Swedish *värnplikt* has been invested with a social meaning better attuned to the understanding of rights/duties, social hierarchies and political order in contemporary society. This reform process

itself is fascinating to observe and provides strong arguments against those considering conscription a military recruitment system already in the dustbin of history. The most striking aspect of this process is its unnoticed and uncontested quality. The vagueness of *värnplikt* has made it possible to fundamentally alter the meaning of the institution without debate. The institution is so vaguely defined that it can undergo far-reaching change without being called into question.

In 1994 the law on Total-Defence-Duty (totalförsvars plikt) signalled that *värnplikt* was undergoing change. The most noticed aspect of this change is the reduction in the numbers of those asked to serve. As part of the reforms, the numbers called to actively serve (do *värnplikt*) has fallen drastically. From a yearly cohort of 46-49.000, 31.000 were called in 1996 and only 17.000 in 2001 (Pliktverket 2003). The plans are that the numbers should fall further to 8.000-10.000 in 2005-2007 and the military suggests that the numbers might be lowered further to only 5.000 (Askelin 2003). This means that whereas 63% of the men in the cohort of 1996 (down from above 80% during the cold war) did active military service, only 17% will do so in 2005 and if the military gets its way only some 10% will in the future. From a principled attachment to “universal” meaning male conscription, the system has now moved to a different understanding on numbers. Only the limited number of men (and voluntary women) required by the defence forces will do active service. Those serving are divided into three categories: commanders (*befälselever*), specialists and rank and file (*meniga*) (Pliktverket 2004, p. 84). Within these overarching categories some 350 sub-functions are defined which the armed forces now recruit for. Both the law and the commission reports preceding its adoption insist that these functions and the numbers recruited to fill them will be subject to regular reviews and adjusted to the needs of the armed forces as will the exact length and nature of education of the recruits (SOU 1990, p. 103). The result incorporates much of the concerns of those who want a functionally organised defence based on the “functions” society needs to fill in the

case of war (Sundelius 2001).

The outcome is sometimes compared to the understanding of *värnplikt* and defence that underlay the 1925 military cuts (SOU 1976; von Konow 1996; Björemann 2000). At the time, it was not functions but “categories” of tasks (*kategoriklyvning*) that needed to be filled. More generally, in 1925 as now the idea was that the size of (and spending on) the armed forces should and could be limited in peacetime. When troops were needed in times of international political tensions and war, the armed forces could be expanded. This “elasticity theory” of the 1920s – referring to the idea that the armed forces should show “elasticity” to the need for them be expanded and reduced in relation to the need for them – has strong resonance with the current ideas of Total-Defence-Duty and educational reserves that are available in case of need. As the second world war approached, international tensions mounted and panic over the state of the Swedish defence set in, the elasticity theory was considered discredited, including by many of its key proponents inside the social democratic party (Molin 1974). In the 1930s (Zetterberg dates it to the 1936 defence reorganisation) the idea of as defence based on elasticity was replaced with the idea of a “Total-Defence” where all resources and all citizens could be drawn in for the national defence. Throughout the postwar period the “Total-Defence” has remained the official doctrine for the Swedish armed forces (SOU 1976; Zetterberg 2004). It is ironic that the present reduction of the numbers called to do military service and the return to something akin to the defence view of the “elasticity theory” comes under the name “Total-Defence-Duty”. It can also be considered as another illustration Swedish capacity to keep terms while altering meanings, just as is happening with the notion of *värnplikt* discussed here.

It would be mistaken to treat the 1994 Total-Defence-Duty merely as a repeat of the reforms in 1925 even if the cuts are similarly drastic. The Total-Defence-Duty is innovative. It alters the social meaning of *värnplikt*. The institution is

being adjusted to social change, to individualization, with evolving conceptions of social hierarchies and of politics. But this process is occurring without public debate. It is presented as if the institution was merely continuing the “old” virtues of conscription, as if the current changes had nothing to do with the changing nation-state relationship and as if there was consequently no need to really rethink the institution. With the law, *värnplik*, now meaning active military service, becomes one form of defence duty (see table 2). It is a subcategory of the general defence Total-Defence-Duty.

The Total-Defence-Duty re-conceptualizes the link between state nation and territory rendered problematic by the “dislocation of political community” (Linklater 1998; Leander 2005 forthcoming). The Total-Defence-Duty no longer assumes that there is an unproblematic correspondence between citizenship, residence and political loyalties. It is not based exclusively on citizenship. All Swedes (men and women) between 16 and 70 and living in Sweden have a Total-Defence-Duty. But so do all foreigners who have resided more than 5 years in Sweden. Foreign citizens are not required to do *värnplik*, nor are Swedish women or Swedish citizens living abroad. These *may* apply if they can prove their intent to return to live in Sweden (Pliktverket, 2004, 5§). More than this, it is no longer assuming that the primary duties of the defence forces are the defence of the national territory (Bergman 2004). Rather, the Total-Defence-Duty are imbued with concerns about Sweden’s international obligations. The willingness to do international service is a central criteria for selection in the recruitment (Pliktverket 2004). The goal is that 30% should volunteer for international operations (Prop 2004, p. 84) only around 7% do (Hopkinson 2004, p. 36). This is not for lack of insistence on behalf of the armed forces.

2. The Total Defence Duty in Summary (source: shortened version of Pliktverket, 2005).

	Swedish Men	Swedish Women	Foreign Residents	Education in peace
Värnplik (age 19-47)	Yes	Voluntary	No	Yes
Civil duty with long basic education (age 18-70)	Yes	Voluntary	No	Yes
Civil duty with short/no basic education (age 16-70)	Yes	Yes	No	Task dependent
General Defence Duty (age 16-70)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Educational Reserve	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Increased attention is paid both to the “cosmopolitan” tasks and responsibilities of the armed forces and the changing nature of political community.

Second, the Total-Defence-Duty reflects a changing understanding of social hierarchies. Whereas the conventional class based distinctions are receding from public debate the importance of identity based social hierarchies is moving to the forefront. Hence whereas the armed forces ceased to collect information about the social origins of the recruits and those making a career in the 1980s (Lövgren 2005), considerable attention has been paid to the fate of first and second generation immigrants (Pliktverket 2005), to homosexuals but above all to the women (for recent contributions see e.g. Flyborg 2004; Quarlsson, Linnéa et al. 2004). The Swedish armed forces have persistently stressed the significance of allowing and promoting, different identities in the armed forces. Among these, women have received by far the greatest attention (Kronsell and Svedberg 2001).

The armed forces argue that women should be covered by *värnplikt* and – if that is not possible – they would like to call all women to selection talks (*mönstring*) (Försvarsmakten Högkvarteret 2004, bilaga 1 p. 3). The argument is that including women would make the pool of competencies the armed forces could draw on larger. The government and the ministry of defence limit the inclusion of women. They claim that at a time of severe cuts in the numbers called to do active service, the inclusion of women would create “legitimacy problems”; that calling women to *mönstring* without an obligation to serve would contradict the logic of the system and that it would be unjustifiably costly (Prop 2004, pp. 85-87). It is unexplained why analogous legitimacy problems, costs, and systemic contradictions do not pertain to the *värnplikt* for men. This said, the government has continuously affirmed that promoting women and other groups (migrants and homosexuals) in the armed forces is in principle a priority.

Finally, the Total-Defence-Duty has come with a profound revision of the conventional assumptions of the links between rights and duties. The abstract and general duty to defend is still there. However, the concrete duty to serve the state militarily is profoundly rethought. There is little reference in any of the texts to the classical rights exchange: duty to do military service as the counterpart of political rights. On the contrary, and in line with the overall individualization, the emphasis is on the rights of individuals and correspondingly on the importance of transforming the military service into something freely chosen (Prop 2004, p. 83). According to the new regulations the motivation of the conscripts has to be documented (Pliktverket 2004, 13§). The armed forces claim that 93,4% of those now doing military service are “highly motivated” (Lövgren 2005, bilaga 4). The armed forces have a “ten point programme” for recruitment focussed on improving the attractiveness of the *värnplikt* (and careers in the military more broadly) by improving the material conditions and the links to the outside job-market. The armed forces are pursuing objectives such as increased material benefits, the use of

short term contracts, generous bonus and pay systems. The drive also includes extending the recognition of military education, notably by expanding the equivalencies granted in civil universities and professions for military education military (Försvarsmakten Högkvarteret 2004).

These changes have reformed *värnplikt* in Sweden. The selective system with individually tailored education, career paths and bonus systems has little in common with the basic male mass-education of the *värnplikt* adopted in 1901. The relationship of the armed forces to social hierarchies is increasingly defined in terms of their relation to gender, homosexuality and immigrants as opposed to in terms of socio-economic inequality. The overarching political setting of this revamped *värnplikt* is cosmopolitan. Tasks are defined in “cosmopolitan” terms while the link to citizenship and territory is loosened. These changes are far reaching. Yet the revamped *värnplikt* is understood and presented as a reformed version of the old *värnplikt*. There is little or no questioning of the principle of conscription as such and those who do question it – e.g. the Swedish Greens (Schlaug 1997) – continue to be few and far between. On the contrary, the principle of *värnplikt* is so much accepted that it is possible for the social democratic youth to argue that, if there are not enough volunteers for international operations, conscripts should be sent (Mohlin 1998).

The vague virtues of the old *värnplikt* are assumed to live on in its new incarnation. Political Sweden can undisturbedly laude the popular anchoring provided by *värnplikt* (e.g. Mohlin 1998; Milton 1999; Landerholm 2001). Military Sweden can point to the importance of *värnplikt* for effectiveness. Had the arguments about *värnplikt* in its former incarnation been more explicit on how these virtues were produced, assuming such automatic transmission would be impossible and a clarification of how and why the old virtues of *värnplikt* are now reproduced required. The question is if the assumed transmission of virtues from the old *värnplikt* can durably underpin the new *värnplikt* which is a profoundly

different institution.

C. An Old Consensus for a New Värnplikt?

The vague established consensus around the old version of *värnplikt* may well imbue the new and altered *värnplikt* with the social meaning necessary for it to become a legitimate and accepted social institution.. Political and Military Sweden are refashioning their accounts of the virtues of *värnplikt*. This is most readily done for Military Sweden as military effectiveness has been a driving force behind the changes. Also Political Sweden is presenting the revamped version of *värnplikt* as consistent with their understanding of the virtues of conscription. Whether or not the reformed accounts of the virtues of *värnplikt* will suffice to uphold the consensus is nonetheless uncertain.

Contrary to the impression left by the discussion surrounding conscription the armed forces in Sweden (pushed by evolving technical requirements or threat pictures) are most unlikely to challenge *värnplikt*. *Värnplikt* in its new guise fits Military Sweden's version of the virtues of *värnplikt* too well. The new system keeps the recruitment pool large. Military Sweden wishes to expand it further. This is why it insists on the inclusion on women in the *värnplikt* (or at least in the *mönstring*). *Värnplikt* in its new guise also continues to make it possible to pull privileged, educated social groups into the armed forces, if they are needed, even if they do not wish to be there. It leaves the armed forces the choice of deciding who is "suitable" and who is exempted from active service. It makes the career prospects in the armed forces better (Lövgren 2005). It paves the way for greater differentiation within the armed forces in terms of conditions and pay is bound to favour the professional and permanent staff (Hederstedt 2002). The Total-Defence-Duty in principle confirms the priority given to a national defence and

the national interests. In principle (if not in practice) it even extends this priority further by introducing a Total-Defence-Duty in peace-time which covers *all* residents in a *more encompassing* age group than its earlier cousin. Moreover, the revamped version of *värnplikt* continues to provide the crucial outward link from the armed forces to society at large. Military Sweden stresses the significance of this link to counter the current downwards trend of public interest in (and knowledge about) defence issues (Lindmark and Stütz 2001; Körlof 2002). They also emphasise its centrality precisely because of the “new” threat picture dominated by non-classical societal threats (Olofsson 2001; Ryding-Berg 2003). Finally, Military Sweden emphasises the value of conscription as a system enabling Sweden to keep its international engagements (Hederstedt 2002; Bratt 2003).

Military Sweden (or part thereof) may well be opposed to the context of *värnplikt* reform. The closing of military basis, the reductions in defence spending and in spending on armaments have been severely criticized within the armed forces. Its effects on the economy and welfare of towns depending entirely on the armed forces as employer (such as Arvidsjaur) has attracted considerable attention (Olsson 2004). However, contestation of the revamped *värnplikt* is virtually absent. Attachment to the institution and the popular anchoring it ensures, is ritually restated as is its significance for military effectiveness. Characteristically, the Swedish commander in chief Hederstedt tells an interviewer: “I do not believe the *värnplikt* will disappear [...] it is so deeply anchored in Swedish society. The *värnplikt* gives a high quality to our soldiers” (Askelin 2003).

Political Sweden can – and does – present the revamped version of *värnplikt* as continuing its version of virtuous *värnplikt*. However, continuity is more strenuous. The popular anchoring provided through the revamped *värnplikt* is obviously less profound than that provided by its predecessors. The Total-Defence-Duty may in principle be more encompassing than the *värnplikt* it is succeeding. In practice, those who effectively come into contact with the armed forces are far

fewer. Opinion polls show a growing number of Swedes being unaware of the Total-Defence-Duty. To imagine that sheer numbers would produce popular anchoring and a democratization of the defence forces at present is difficult.

Moreover, it is difficult to argue that conscription is important as a means of democratizing the armed forces and using them for the promotion of social mobility. Conscription is still practised, but the reformed Swedish armed forces are increasingly organised as a professional force. It is an institution increasingly distanced from the population at large. This raises traditional concerns about which model of Sweden the armed forces are defending and re-producing. The occasional revelations of the activities of extreme right wing activists in and through the armed forces are oil on the fire. The press has written about the enrolment of openly racist persons for international duty in Bosnia and the failed attempt of the Western Marine Command (*Marinkommando Väst*) to dismiss a recruit because of his open Nazi sympathies (Schlaug 1997). Moreover, the selectiveness of the new individualised, career oriented system, makes it hard to imagine that the *värnplikt* ensures social mobility in the armed forces. The new system leaves it to the armed forces to decide who is suitable and motivated enough for which position. Even if the armed forces insist that this is done so as to further the presence of individuals with varying identities and backgrounds there is no evidence that this actually works. Surveys and anecdotal evidence alike points to a strong and systematic bias (Kronsell and Svedberg 2005, forthcoming). Lastly, the tension between rights and duties remains principally tilted towards duties. Conscription remains a duty overriding many rights. It is not clear individual rights are in any way better protected now than in the past.

These tensions between Political Sweden's account of the virtues of *värnplikt* and the actual social practice are not new. They have been accentuated by the recent reforms. The declining numbers undermines the popular anchoring version of *värnplikt*. The weight of Military in shaping the education, deciding who is

conscripted, for what tasks and with what career options makes *värnplikt* seem of limited use in challenging established social hierarchies, particularly those inside the military. The emphasis on cosmopolitan tasks might be argued to fit the attempt of Political Sweden to move from a defence of “*Folkhemmet*” to a “*värdegrundat försvar*” (value based defence) (Strandbrink 2005). However, this move is likely to do more to undermine Political Sweden’s understanding of the virtues of *värnplikt* than to strengthen it. Conscripts are not used in international operations even if they are encouraged to sign up. The reason is that the duty to defend cosmopolitan values is not accepted as a valid reason to override the rights and freedoms of Swedish men and even less to ask them to risk their lives. Shifting from the defence of *Folkhemmet* to the defence of cosmopolitan values is therefore not something that can be used by Political Sweden to bolster its version of the virtuous *värnplikt*. Rather this version seems increasingly fragile and there are two good reasons to think that it will become even more so.

The first is that public support for *värnplikt* seems to be dwindling. This will put pressure on Political Sweden to strengthen its story about the virtues of the *värnplikt* or to abandon it. The *värnplikt* never enjoyed undivided public support, particularly from those asked to serve in the rank and file. In early 20th Century Sweden, emigration of conscriptable young men peaks around the time of drafting (Ericson 1999, p 111). The century of *värnplikt* is also a century of dissent, defection and escape the story of which still remains to be told in detail (much as elsewhere) (Paret 1993). At present support is weakening further (Lindmark and Stütz 2001, p. 4; Körlof 2002). A survey showed that half of the Swedish population favoured a military recruitment based entirely on voluntary engagement (Pliktverket 1999). The interests in defence issues more generally is declining. Almost 20% of the Swedish population does not think that a Swedish defence is important at all (Pliktverket 1999). It is therefore no accident that the head of the planning section in Swedish Headquarters introduces his discussion about the

future of *värnplikt* by a thorough discussion of how it can be fitted into broader social transformations (Pettersson 2002). It is also significant that former minister of defence Björn von Sydow pointed to two problems with the revamped *värnplikt*: (i) that because of the reduced numbers serving the system would increasingly be thought of as unfair and arbitrary and (ii) that it might make issues of defence lose their importance for society at large. It is probably even more noteworthy that von Sydow pointed to these difficulties only to answer an explicit question by a journalist about the drawbacks of the *värnplikts* reform. Before this answer, the minister had painted a very positive picture of Swedish *värnplikt* and its future (Mohlin 1998).

A second reason to think that Political Sweden may start questioning the vague consensus around the virtues of *värnplikt* is the impact of international trends and developments. The received wisdom internationally is that conscription is a dysfunctional system ripe. Beyond the fact that it may be tempting (both for Political and Military Sweden) to follow accept the prevailing international wisdom, the questioning of the *värnplikt* internationally is bound to lead to increased questioning of the institution also in Sweden. The press, public opinion, civil society organisations of various kinds are likely to bring the issue up for discussion and hence force both Political and Military Sweden to clarify and specify their stories about the virtues of the institutions. As just outlined Military Sweden still has a strong case for preserving the system. For Political Sweden the case is less than persuasive. If words have to be put on the processes that are supposed to make the *värnplikt* virtuous, these words will be difficult to find.

Conclusion

Vagueness has been and is still of essence for *värnplikt*. Vagueness made the introduction of *värnplikt* possible. Vagueness was a precondition for the consensus around the virtues of *värnplikt*. It explains how the competing and often incompatible understandings of *värnplikt* in Military and Political Sweden could converge around the same social institution and the same social practices. When open conflict did occur, it was through vagueness that consensus could be reestablished and *värnplikt* saved from unravelling. Finally, at present vagueness explains the ease with which the profound and in many ways radical reform of *värnplikt* could pass almost unperceived. By presenting the Total-Defence-Duty as a continuation of the *värnplikt* its nebulous virtues are assumed sufficient justify the change and the institution itself.

The consequence is that there has been no call on the political imagination which would otherwise have been needed to justify the new system. If precision was introduced, it would undermine Political Sweden's version of the virtues of *värnplikt*. By the same token, Military Sweden's version of the virtues of the institution would appear partial and therefore contestable. Vagueness and *värnplikt* in other words continue to be intrinsically linked in Sweden. As the paper concluded, there are signs that the vagueness will come under pressure. If it does, so will *värnplikt*. This will again politicize the issue of military recruitment. Swedish policy-makers will face the eternal task of reconciling fundamentally diverging positions on military recruitment:

“The free man does not want to become a soldier; the democratic man abhors unequal burdens; the military man would like to ignore their claims, but cannot. It is the task of the statesman to reconcile the three, and to do so in a way likely to last” (Cohen 1985, p. 188).

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