GUISES OF POWER

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Legitimisation of Resistance: 
The Argumentation of Rebellious Peasants, 1742–43

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A great number of peasants from the province of Dalarna walked every year to Stockholm to seek work during the lull of the agricultural year. They could not provide themselves with a livelihood solely by farming so this had to be supplemented by seasonal labour for burghers and nobility in Stockholm. During the spring of 1742, the road between the capital and Dalarna was busy. Discontent was rife among the peasants of Dalarna with the way trade with Norway had been restricted during a famine, while a war with Russia was being unsuccessfully waged—a discontent that was frequently vented.

One of these peasants, Per Andersson, met a clergyman at an inn on his way home from Stockholm and in a lengthy conversation described the treachery of the nobility towards the peasantry. He said that the soldiers in the war had been betrayed and left to die at the hands of the Russians or from disease. This, along with other betrayals by the nobility would inevitably lead to the gathering of some 10,000 to 12,000 men who would march to Stockholm and thereby those who had caused the great suffering in the country would be punished. The clergyman became quite uneasy and tried to persuade Per Andersson that an uprising was bound to lead to civil war and the ruination of the whole country. Andersson was adamant, however, and a year later he was among the leaders of a march of 5,000 peasants from

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1 This article is based on a study in connection with my doctoral thesis on the peasant uprising in Dalarna in 1743.
Dalarna to Stockholm.\textsuperscript{2} The aims of the peasants had by then been specified and concentrated, but their justification for the uprising still rested upon the belief that they had been betrayed by those who were their superiors and protectors. The purpose of this paper is to trace the lines of argumentation among the peasants of Dalarna that served to legitimise so severe an offence against the state as an uprising.\textsuperscript{3}

Peasant uprisings and political participation

Peasant uprisings were relatively uncommon in the Swedish realm during the early modern period. Certainly a number of riots and rebellions had occurred, but none that significantly threatened central authority. After the Club War in Finland, an extensive peasant uprising which culminated in 1596–97\textsuperscript{4}, the Swedish and Finnish peasantry were seemingly content until 1743, when Sweden's last peasant uprising took place in the province of Dalarna. This tranquillity has been attributed to the—from a European perspective—relatively extensive participation in government by the peasants, both in local communities and at the national level. There were channels to the central authorities through which the peasants could air their grievances, either by representation at the Diet or by a considerable degree of self-rule and autonomy in the local community. Participatory institutions functioned as a safety-valve for any more serious discontent that might arise. Political culture has been regarded as being based on co-operation, interaction and reciprocity between the state and the people—a political symbiosis.\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{2} Clergyman Pratenius to County Governor Cederbielke, 24 May 1742 (Justitierevisionens arkiv, Besvär- och ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. I) All source material is found at Riksarkivet, Stockholm, unless otherwise stated.
Four Estates were represented in the Swedish Diet, the nobility, the clergy, the burghers, and the peasantry. The participation of the peasantry was based upon the election of a representative to the Diet in each Hundred. Only freeholders and tenants of the Crown had the right to elect and to be representatives in the peasant Estate, while the tenants of the nobility did not. At the Diet, the representative put forward the grievances (besvär) of the local community which had been agreed upon at the meeting held in the Hundred and were listed in the representative’s letter of attorney. The grievances for the whole Estate of the peasantry were summarised and became the main issues of the Estate during the Diet. This was the most important political channel for the peasantry, the Diet being the institution where it could influence taxes, enlistment of soldiers, and other obligations to the state. Grievances did not have to be made collectively; individuals could also appeal directly to the King in a supplication. Supplications were mainly private and did not usually deal with political issues, although they were one of the two main channels to state authority available to the peasants. The Diet was only one aspect of the political participation of the peasantry: local self-rule in the parish or village were the most common institutions for political activity. Here local problems were discussed, mostly concerning parish accounts, the upkeep of Church property, and poor-relief. The parish was also a preparatory institution for the peasantry’s wider participation in politics. Issues to be included in the Hundred’s grievances were discussed on parish level.

However, it is premature to suppose that the absence of uprisings signified general peasant content with their participation in government. The relationship between state and the local communities was not egalitarian, and peasants’ rights were circumscribed by law and societal order. Although the peasants were represented at the Diet, they were not permitted to participate in politics on a national level on equal terms with the other Estates. During the Age of Liberty (1719–1772), however, peasants were becoming

\[\text{At the beginning of the eighteenth century, each of these three groups made up approximately one-third of the peasant population. The group of freeholders increased during this century at the expense of the tenants of the Crown. Maria Ågren “Land and Debt: On the Process of Social Differentiation in Rural Sweden, circa 1750–1850”, in } \textbf{Rural History}, \textbf{vol. 5}, 1994, \text{p. 25.}\]

\[\text{Pär Frohnert ”Administration i Sverige under frihetstiden”, in } \textbf{Administrasjon i Norden på 1700-talet}, \text{Oslo, 1985, pp. 189–200, 250–259.}\]

\[\text{Frohnert, 1985, pp. 236–241, Gustafsson, 1994, pp. 70–78.}\]
increasingly involved in a wider range of political issues than earlier, as the power of the Diet increased. Accordingly, the peasantry’s grievances also gained in importance during this period. The political self-esteem of the peasantry in the Diet grew.\textsuperscript{9}

Political action and participation in government was, thanks to their representation in a wide range of political institutions, not unfamiliar to peasants. Nevertheless, their means of political action also reached beyond the norms stipulated by central authority. Peasant political culture, in both a practical and an ideological sense, included elements which were not approved by or considered legitimate by the state. Political action which was considered illegitimate could for instance range from refusal to pay taxes or enlist soldiers, to extensive actions such as uprisings.\textsuperscript{10} In practice, actions such as uprisings were resorted to infrequently, but as peasants actually did rebel in 1743, it is not too bold to assume that they had an ideology which included among other things ideas on why, when, and how uprisings should take place. The purpose of the argumentation of the peasantry in Dalarna in 1742-43, preceding the uprising of 1743, was to legitimise illegal means of political action.

Conceptions of state ideology

State control increased during the early modern period while the population was subjected to state propaganda through the state Church. Martin Luther’s catechism was the primary ideological channel which was effectively disseminated by the Church, backed up by a legal provision that the entire population was to learn it. The people were taught how each individual had a certain purpose in society. A subject’s place in society was determined by the collective he belonged to—each of which was part of the body politic. The King was society’s head, the four Estates its limbs, none of which could function without the others. For the great majority of the people, their main duties were to work and to obey their superiors. In return, the people were


\textsuperscript{10} See Asa Karlsson’s article in this volume for an example of peasant political action of the former kind.
provided for and protected by the King, as a father protects and looks after his children. State ideology was extremely influential, it justified absolutism and the prevailing order of society.\textsuperscript{11}

This reciprocity, the system of rights and obligations between the King and the people, can be seen as a contract. Use of the term contract does not imply that the relationship between state and people was based on cooperation and equality. Rather, it should be seen as a power relationship. As this relationship can be described as a contract, it can consequently also be broken, either by the people, as when they refused to pay taxes, or in other ways disobeyed their superiors, or by the state authorities or the King, when the people were no longer protected and looked after as they considered they should be. The latter is what happened in 1742–43. Peasants used this conception of a broken contract to justify acts which were not approved by state authority—this through an increase in the scope of political issues that peasants felt obliged to participate in. As a result, it was (in the peasants’ view) a completely legitimate and legal uprising. Opposition to state power and authority was justified through the conception of a breach of contract and the following state of emergency. Nevertheless, breach of contract did not automatically lead to an uprising; only when it could be defined as an emergency was it possible to take any action. For a state of emergency to be defined, a situation or an occurrence must be perceived to be sufficiently serious. Constituting this state of emergency was a question of definition—a definition which was driven through by the individuals or groups who had the power to do so. As a state of emergency was defined it also meant that measures had to be taken to rectify and master it, and thus to restore the contract.\textsuperscript{12} Ironically, the uprising which followed upon this breach of contract by the state was, in turn, regarded as a breach of contract on the part of the peasantry because an uprising threatened the hierarchical order and peace in society.

The events and situations which, according to the peasants, came to constitute this state of emergency were greatly dependent upon the politics of the day in Sweden in the years preceding 1743, as well as upon the state’s


\textsuperscript{12} Magnus Hörnqvist \textit{Foucaults maktanalys}, Stockholm, 1996, pp. 66–68.
ideological system. These were briefly, from the point of view of the peasantry in Dalarna, that the peasantry's basic right to survival was threatened, the King did not fulfil his obligations towards the people, and the deceit by the peasantry's own representatives in the Diet.

Lines of argumentation

Subsistence

Peasants' subsistence has been regarded as their most important right, a right they would be most ardent in defending. Attention has been drawn several times to the importance of subsistence in connection with uprisings and protests, most notably by E. P. Thompson in his essay on the moral economy of the English crowd. Here, Thompson shows how the people were in accord about what type of actions were legitimate concerning their subsistence. The reciprocity between the people and their superiors had a moral condition which could be turned against the superiors if they did not fulfil their side of the bargain. Generally speaking, one can say that the people expected protection from the state, as those in power had responsibility for the lives of their subjects. During the period studied here the peasants themselves found the safeguards provided by the state inadequate. A number of peasants from Dalarna drinking at an inn commented that despite good harvests in recent years, the price of corn was far too high for the peasantry to be able pay. This was all the fault of the clergy and the nobility who laid plans for the purpose of starving the peasantry and forcing them to pay unreasonable prices for bread. Now, the peasants were purposely hindered from supporting themselves; they had, in fact, been denied the right to make their own living. They concluded that at some time these burdens would

have to be cast off, and those who were now ruining the country would have
to be punished. This was best achieved, they said, by marching to Stockholm.\textsuperscript{16}

What also added to discontent among the peasantry in Dalarna was the war
against Russia. This had begun in 1741 and almost immediately brought great
losses of land in Finland and heavy casualties, among them soldiers from Dalarna.
Equipping new soldiers, which was an obligation of the households to the
state, was expensive. Peasants in Dalarna found this obligation unjust—why
should the peasants and the burghers bear the responsibility for defending
the country by equipping and enlisting soldiers, while the nobility and clergy
had no responsibilities at all?\textsuperscript{17} Besides the defeat and cost of the war, the
peasants felt that their soldiers had been betrayed in battle by the generals.
Great loss of life was blamed on the generals being far too friendly with the
Russian Empress. Rumours said that the generals had held peace negotiations
with her without the knowledge of the Diet in Stockholm.\textsuperscript{18}

To make matters worse, trade with Norway was restricted. Dalarna, on
the Norwegian border, depended largely on trade with the neighbouring
country. In return for handicrafts, peasants in Dalarna received salt, dried
fish, and other necessities. A duty was levied on trade with Norway, and
enforced diligently. This led to loud complaints in Dalarna and other border
provinces. Customs administrators were said to raid homes in search of smug-
gled goods. However, the consequences of the duty were considered to be
more serious. Earlier, those who were poor could use trade as an extra income.
After the duty was imposed, people could not compensate for the famine by
trading with Norway. This was also ascribed to the nobility—the duty was
another part of their plan to ruin the people.\textsuperscript{19}

The peasantry considered it their right to receive aid from their superiors,
and expected them to send corn, to lower taxes in hard times, or to stop the
enlistment of more soldiers. Despite this, sufficient help had not been given
by those who were supposed to be the peasantry’s superiors and protectors—

\textsuperscript{16} Bailiff Schultz to His Majesty the King undated, arrived 6 May 1742 (Justitierevisionens
arkiv, Besvär- och ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. 1).
\textsuperscript{17} Letter from the peasantry in Dalarna to His Majesty the King, supplement to County Gov-
ernor Wennerstedt to His Majesty the King, 14 April 1743 (Landshövdingarnas brev till KM:t,
Kopparbergs län 1741–44).
\textsuperscript{18} Unknown to His Majesty the King undated, arrived 6 May 1742 (Justitierevisionens arkiv,
Besvär- och ansökningsmål, utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol I).
\textsuperscript{19} Pastor Alstrin to His Majesty the King, 5, 7 July 1742 (Justitierevisionens arkiv, Besvär- och
ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. 1), Pastor Alstrin’s reports to His Majesty the
King, 5, 8, 14 July 1742 in Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia del 3, Stockholm, 1817.
in this case, the Diet or the Council of the Realm, which during the Age of Liberty functioned as a government when the King’s power had been limited. The peasantry felt that they had been left with no support when bad times became worse. Famine, disease, taxes and the war added to the burden of the peasantry. As no help was forthcoming from those whose duty it was to provide it, a state of emergency was constituted, an emergency which only could be solved by an uprising.

The King as protector of the peasantry

The power of the King had been limited greatly during the Age of Liberty. This meant that the King was no longer capable of aiding his subjects as was the intention of the contract between the state and the people, a contract which was actually made between King and people. Although the King could not always fulfil his obligations to his subjects, there were ways for the peasantry to explain why he swayed from his commitments. According to peasant conceptions, the King was the guarantor of peasants’ rights, he personally assured that justice was done to the people. Thus, when peasants’ grievances were not attended to at the Diet, or supplications left without remedy this could be attributed to the idea that the King himself had never seen their grievances or supplications. He had been deluded by evil advisors, usually from the nobility, and had never had the chance to come to the aid of his subjects.20 The issue of the King’s power arose when a new successor to the throne had to be chosen as the Queen had died in 1741 leaving the King without any heirs. The succession was an important issue for the peasants in Dalarna, and they wrote to the Council of the Realm and stated the qualities they sought in a new King: he should be of Swedish blood, have the welfare of the country closest at heart and be the person who was of most use to the country. However, these were not the only qualities the

peasants sought. The new King should also have more power so that he could be of help to the peasantry and circumscribe the power of the nobility. These qualities in a king could be found in Denmark, the peasants argued. Denmark still had an absolute monarch and this was what the peasantry in Sweden also strove for, and accordingly, the Danish Crown Prince became the favoured candidate by the whole peasant Estate, which alone chose him to be heir to the Swedish throne. Just in case, the peasants in Dalarna said that they would walk to Stockholm to ensure that the right person was chosen.

The peasantry, however, still had some faith in the incumbent King, Fredrik I. When soldiers from Dalarna were to be shipped from Stockholm to the war in Finland, they refused to leave until they had the King with them as their commander. But the ambiguous role of the King did create problems in the peasant’s conception of the order of the division of power. Complaints arose in Dalarna concerning the problem of who was their superior and ruler of the peasantry. Was it the nobility, who held power but did not use it to fulfil the duties of the King towards the people? Or was it the King, whose power had been reduced, but who was the legitimate ruler according to the peasants? This problem was described in the terms of having "too many kings". Everyone in Stockholm who wore a wig, the peasants said, thought that he was King. The King himself, on the other hand, could not be considered to be a real King, as his power was limited. Natural order was having only one God and one King. In accordance with this, the peasants felt they should have only one King. The only way to solve this problem, peasants from Dalarna said, was to go to Stockholm and find out how many Kings they had. The legitimacy of the nobility, or the Council of the Realm, and the King himself was definitely questioned. Nobody lived up to the expectations of the peasantry during the hard times they were confronted with.

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21 Gustav Schedin’s papers (fol. 676, Svea hovrätt, Huvudarkivet, Handlingar rörande Dalupproret); Instructions to deputation of peasantry from Dalarna to the Diet, February 1743 (fol. 803, Svea hovrätt, Huvudarkivet, Handlingar rörande Dalupproret).
22 Schönberg’s report to the Council of the Realm, 22 June 1742 (Justitierrevisionens arkiv, Besvärs- och ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. I).
23 Andreas Österberg to his mother, 13 May 1742, Johan Westeen to his mother, 21 May 1742 (Justitierrevisionens arkiv, Besvärs- och ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. I).
24 Bailiff Schultz to His Majesty the King, undated, arrived 6 May 1742 (Justitierrevisionens arkiv, Besvärs- och ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. I); Bailiff Lindborg to County Governor Lindcreutz, 7 June 1742 (fol. 746–748 Svea hovrätt, Huvudarkivet, Handlingar rörande Dalupproret); Pastor Alstrin’s reports to His Majesty the King, 5, 8, 14 July 1742 in Handlingar rörande Skandinaviens historia del 3, Stockholm, 1817.
Deceit in the Diet

As a final resort, the peasants were represented at the Diet, where their spokespersons were able to influence decisions. The peasants who remained in the local community during the Diet kept a watching eye on their representatives who were not permitted to deviate from the letter of attorney from the local community. They were bound by the prevailing ideal among the peasantry of an imperative mandate which meant that if issues were to be resolved during the Diet which the local community had not mentioned, the representative could not take part in the decision. The imperative mandate also meant that if their representative, by following instructions from home, had not approved a decision which was made, the local community was not bound by it. This had affected how the peasantry in Dalarna perceived their own part in the war. Although their own representative at a previous Diet had voted for a declaration of war against Russia, the local community was not bound by this decision because he had not been instructed to do so, and therefore it had no obligation to equip soldiers—which they in consequence refused to do. As their representatives had not been authorised to make such a decision, they could have, and should have, stopped the war from its outset. This led to the peasants’ representatives from the previous Diet being maltreated and blamed for the war and its consequences for the local communities. These men were considered to have deceived the local communities, and only one of four representatives was re-elected for the next Diet.

There was also great uncertainty of what possibilities were actually open to the peasants’ representatives when they attended the Diet. Some peasants said that their representatives had not informed them of the decisions made by the rest of the Estates, with no prospect of influencing decisions. Others

complained that the peasants at the Diet were kept in the dark and could do nothing but approve the bills presented by the other Estates. Delegations were sent from Dalarna to the Diet in Stockholm to visit their representatives. Suspicion was growing that the representatives themselves might not follow the orders they had from home, making unauthorised decisions and only obeying the nobility, possibly even taking bribes. There were also numerous complaints that the grievances which had been sent to the Diet had been ignored. Nothing had therefore been resolved in their favour. This, however, did not have to be the case, peasants reasoned. Had the King had more power, he would have ensured that their grievances were attended to. There was a general disbelief in what could be accomplished in the Diet on the behalf of the peasantry, and other forms of political action were discussed en route from Dalarna to Stockholm. In yet another sense, the peasantry had been betrayed. Their own representatives could not be fully trusted to realise that their main objective was to ensure the welfare of the peasantry—on the contrary, they had been party to bringing problems upon the peasantry. Those who actually bore responsibility for the well-being of the people, their superiors and especially the King, did not fulfil their obligations. The problems that had arisen regarding the war, the famine, and trade must be solved by the peasants themselves.

Marching to Stockholm

A state of emergency compelled peasants in Dalarna to take action. For a long time there was merely talk of marching to Stockholm; what was to transpire when they got there was not discussed. However, in the spring of 1743, the situation was brought to a head. The Diet was coming to an end without the issues that had been put forward by the peasantry in Dalarna being attended to. Enlistment of soldiers for the war continued, even though peace negotiations were being held with Russia. More drastic political action

27 Schönberg’s report to the Council of the Realm, 20 April 1742, County Governor Cederbielke to His Majesty the King, 22 June 1742, Pastor Alstrin’s report, 8 July 1742 (Justitierevisionens arkiv, Besvärs- och ansökningsmål, Utslagsakt 24/12 1743, no. 125, vol. I); Pastors Rabenius and Lundborg to His Majesty the King, 18 June 1742, fol. 731–733, Olof Ersson i Myckelbyn to County Governor Lindcreutz, 30 June 1742, fol. 756–759 (Svea hovrätt, Huvudarkivet, Handlingar rörande Dalupproret).
became necessary, it was no longer enough to send deputations to the Diet. On the last day of May, the peasants of Dalarna decided to leave their homes and march to Stockholm. Five thousand assembled and quite peacefully marched the ten-day march to Stockholm. They were met by several delegations from the Diet and by the King himself on their way but were not dissuaded. Instead they marched into the capital and stated their demands to the Council of the Realm. Negotiations were held for two days and during this time, independently of the demands of the peasants, peace was made with Russia and another candidate than the one favoured by the peasants was chosen to succeed to the Throne. Meanwhile, troops gathered in Stockholm to defend it against the peasants from Dalarna. Negotiations between the peasants and the Council collapsed, which led to a battle in the centre of Stockholm, within viewing distance from the royal palace. Over one hundred peasants were either killed or wounded, while a further three hundred died later in prison from injuries and disease. Two thousand were imprisoned, and the majority of those who had rebelled were led on a humiliating march back to Dalarna. Six were executed for their participation in the uprising, another forty were sentenced to prison.\(^28\)

The uprising initiated in Dalarna 1743 was unlike other uprisings as no violence was used against the nobility. The march to Stockholm shows more similarities with a demonstration than with a classical uprising. This finds its explanation in the justifications presented by the peasants. The contract between people and their superiors had been broken by the state and the King, an emergency was at hand. As those who were supposed to protect the fatherland had not done so, the peasants had a responsibility to save the fatherland—and importantly, they believed they could. How far-reaching this responsibility was felt to be is uncertain. Probably, it was felt that it would be enough to demonstrate that a state of emergency existed so as to warn the state authorities of the gravity of the situation, thus explaining the relatively peaceful manner in which the uprising took place. The aim of the uprising was not to upset the existing societal order, but the power of definition was contested by the peasants as they found that the state authorities had used power without consideration of the rights and needs of the peasantry. Consequently, an uprising was not only possible, it was legitimate, appropriate, and justified.

\(^28\) Beckman, 1930.