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## Political Knowledge in Public Circulation

### The Case of Subsidies in Eighteenth-Century Sweden

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*Published in:*  
Circulation of Knowledge

2018

[Link to publication](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Bodensten, E. (2018). Political Knowledge in Public Circulation: The Case of Subsidies in Eighteenth-Century Sweden. In J. Östling, E. Sandmo, D. Larsson Heidenblad, A. Nilsson Hammar, & K. H. Nordberg (Eds.), *Circulation of Knowledge: Explorations in the History of Knowledge* (pp. 82-104). Nordic Academic Press.

*Total number of authors:*

1

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# Political knowledge in public circulation

The case of subsidies  
in eighteenth-century Sweden

*Erik Bodenstein*

In a recent article, Johan Östling and David Larsson Heidenblad introduce a Swedish audience to a key concept in knowledge history—circulation.<sup>1</sup> They argue that historians' recent interest in knowledge circulation should specifically be directed towards *public* knowledge circulation. In line with the theoretical discussion seen in recent years in fields such as the history of science, the history of knowledge, and global history—which has begun to converge into a certain degree of consensus—they argue that the clear distinction between the production and the communication of knowledge should be abandoned, as should the simple model of diffusion. The focus should furthermore be shifted from the origins and the production of knowledge towards the circulation process and the context in which this knowledge was or became significant. Here, the historian should keep in mind that knowledge has potentially changed in the circulation process, both in terms of content and form, which is why the analysis should also focus on how knowledge has changed as it moved between locations, actors, media and genres. In addition to the social, spatial, and media dimensions of circulation, the analysis should also include factors such as power relations in society, which may have limited the circulation of knowledge in various ways: one cannot assume that knowledge has circulated freely, equally accessible to all.

However, following the historians of science James Secord and

Andreas Daum, Östling and Larsson Heidenblad argue that the circulation process should be studied specifically in a societal context, as an important societal phenomenon.<sup>2</sup> When, where, how, and why has knowledge historically been societally significant, seen as legitimate and relevant to larger groups of people? And in what ways has this knowledge been reshaped in the process of societal circulation? Östling and Larsson Heidenblad argue that these are questions that should be at the forefront for historians studying the circulation of knowledge.

Herein lies an implicit critique of previous research, which often, although to a lesser extent, has clarified the relationship between the analysed knowledge and society at large. Sometimes the claims regarding societal relevance and scope have simply been too great. Östling and Larsson Heidenblad argue that instead of studying knowledge of lesser obvious impact on society and how it circulated in relatively small social and geographical contexts—frequently within the scientific community—historians of knowledge should to a greater extent focus on aspects such as societal discoveries and knowledge breakthroughs, in addition to how crises such as war and epidemics have affected the circulation of knowledge. In some cases, this necessitates a shift in emphasis to other actors, practices, arenas, time periods, and sources. This perspective also broadens the concept of knowledge, beyond science, to the point where knowledge as a religious belief or economic theory also becomes highly interesting. The focus is on the kind of knowledge that Andreas Daum refers to as ‘public knowledge’, that is, the widely accepted, albeit not uncontested, understanding of a much wider group of people.

For a cultural historian like myself, with an interest in the general rather than the particular in society, Östling and Larsson Heidenblad’s approach is both attractive and important. But is it also applicable to an early modern context? To eighteenth-century Sweden, my own field of research? Did the circulation of knowledge in this time period leave enough traces in the sources to enable such an analysis? Is it possible to follow the knowledge in transit, throughout early modern society, via media read by larger groups of people and arenas they frequented? Is it possible, as Larsson Heidenblad has done for a much later period, to analyse how the knowledge in an influential book circulated and was mediated, reshaped, and received?<sup>3</sup> Can this type of influence be

judged when we lack information concerning geographical distribution and the size of the editions, when it is impossible to accurately date texts, and when the names of the knowledge actors in question are frequently not known to us? And what is the effect if the analysis is extended to include politically controversial knowledge, which was subject to strict censorship?

In this essay, I do not claim to answer these questions. Instead, I aim to demonstrate one possible approach to the problem of the public circulation of knowledge in the early modern period, namely to analyse the processes and the moments when public access and communication of a particular body of knowledge increased significantly. This more modest approach differs from Östling and Larsson Heidenblad's in that it is restricted to the public sphere, an important, if limited, part of society.

My empirical case concerns the eighteenth-century equivalent of the modern field of international relations, and, more specifically, political knowledge of subsidies (sums of money paid by one state or prince to another, in return for military or political assistance) and the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance. The guiding questions are why, when, and how this particular body of knowledge began to circulate as public knowledge and became prominent in the eighteenth-century Swedish public sphere; what was the content and nature of this body of knowledge; and to what extent did it change in the process of public circulation.

## The when and why

For much of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Sweden was aligned with France as the junior partner in a political and military subsidy alliance. This determined Swedish foreign policy to a considerable extent. With the help of extensive French subsidies, impoverished Sweden was in a position to significantly increase its military capabilities and implement an activist policy that would have been impossible otherwise. In exchange, Sweden was forced to become a part of the European system of alliances, and to partially conform to the interests of France. Within a small group of Swedish statesmen and military leaders, there was full knowledge of the great importance of

the French subsidies in terms of Sweden's military abilities and foreign policy orientation. For a long time, however, this knowledge did not circulate in the Swedish public sphere. There was a strong view that only a handful of statesmen should have knowledge of such state secrets.<sup>4</sup>

Then in 1735–43, and again and more importantly in 1769, this changed. Before and during the 1769 session of the Swedish Diet, a stunned public was able to read about the long-standing Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance in a large number of texts of different genres and published in different media. Here, a vast field of knowledge concerning subsidies, their history, and their function in the international system was laid bare in print. In order to understand why this came about, and why at this particular time, we must take into account a number of overlapping political factors.

One such factor was that the Swedish political system had been moving in the direction of parliamentary democracy ever since 1720 or so, the result being a much less powerful monarch and a more limited concentration of power. This altered the conditions for political knowledge circulation on a structural level.<sup>5</sup> Since the 1730s, the Diet was dominated by two parties—the Hats and the Caps—where the former strongly supported the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance, whereas the latter tended to lean more towards Russia and Great Britain, and sought to carry out a more cautious policy, balancing between the major European powers. This party political conflict soon drew in more and more people, and spread beyond the closed doors of the Diet. From 1735 until the next session of the Diet in 1738, the Hats, in collaboration with the French ambassador, used the promise of French subsidies to mobilize political support and overthrow the Cap-dominated government. This scheme was successful as the Diet dismissed the government and replaced it with one that was friendlier towards France.<sup>6</sup> The old Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance from the seventeenth century was renewed, and in the event lasted until the 1760s. During these critical years, knowledge of the subsidies was still almost exclusively circulated by means of handwritten pamphlets. Official censorship prior to publication mostly stopped political knowledge circulation in printed texts.<sup>7</sup>

The domestic and foreign political situation of the 1730s and early 1740s soon altered, and with it the once great interest in discussing

the subsidy alliance in the pamphlet literature. During these years, knowledge of the subsidies only appears to have circulated sporadically, and it was definitely not at the centre of the political debate, as was the case previously. In the 1760s, however, the political situation started to change. The fiscal chaos that followed the Seven Years War (1756–63), in addition to other factors, forced France to suspend its subsidy payments to Sweden—a significant setback for the Swedish government. During the Diet of 1765–66, the Caps finally managed to break the Hats’ hold on government, which had lasted for several decades, and form a new government of their own. However, they failed in their efforts to replace the suspended French subsidies with British equivalents. The political situation of the 1730s thus seemed to be about to repeat itself. The Hat opposition prepared itself to mobilize political support and take back the government by using the issue of subsidies at the next Diet, scheduled for April 1769. Meanwhile, the anti-French position of the Cap government renewed France’s interest in helping the opposition in its endeavour. Pro-government forces likewise prepared to defend the current policy and criticize the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance. As a result, both sides received substantial financial support from their respective foreign backers. There are good reasons to believe that some of these funds were directed into lobbying on the once again key political issue of subsidies.<sup>8</sup>

Thus it was that a large number of printed texts started to appear in 1769 arguing either for or against the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance, as well as subsidies in general. Just as in 1735–43, the political actors, both foreign and domestic, now had strong reasons for circulating this body of knowledge. However, there was a crucial difference compared to the knowledge circulation thirty years prior, and that was the new and exceedingly far-reaching Freedom of the Press Act, introduced by the new Cap government in December 1766.<sup>9</sup> At this point, the session of the Diet was just about to end, so it was not until the following Diet of 1769 that it became clear to what extent the new law had actually changed the conditions for the public circulation of political knowledge. For the first time in Swedish history, the authorities now allowed the public circulation of knowledge concerning something as politically sensitive as the subsidy alliance, even though the ban on libelling the government, the Diet, and foreign powers remained



in place, which is why the authors sometimes still used some caution when expressing their views.<sup>10</sup>

In pinning down when this body of knowledge had its public breakthrough, and why, we should also take into account the economic crisis that had continued to worsen throughout the 1760s.<sup>11</sup> At its root was the Swedish intervention in the Seven Years War, which resulted in fiscal chaos in Sweden just as in many other parts of Europe.<sup>12</sup> The crisis was aggravated by the inflationary policies that were the Hat government's response to their abysmal finances. The situation became truly disastrous after the change of government in 1765–66 and the deflationary policies launched by the Diet, and by the time of the Diet of 1769 things had come to a head. Even more trying, France first suspended and then completely cancelled its subsidy payments, which were crucial for the Swedish state budget. And all the while, the crisis fuelled the need for economic knowledge and debate. This is evident in the pamphlet literature, which in these years devoted a great deal of attention to monetary and fiscal issues.<sup>13</sup> The question of the subsidies also had a given place.

### How knowledge circulated

So far, it appears as if the final breakthrough of public knowledge in 1769 is best explained by the particular political situation, both domestic and foreign; by gradual and more sudden changes in the political and media system; and by a complex and serious socio-economic crisis.<sup>14</sup> However, when we proceed to the question of *how* this knowledge circulated, we are able to conclude that these changes seem significantly less dramatic. The new Freedom of the Press Act meant that knowledge concerning subsidies, as well as knowledge concerning international relations more generally, also began to circulate in printed media. In addition to the previously completely dominant handwritten pamphlet<sup>15</sup>—which continued to play an essential role in terms of political knowledge circulation—the printed pamphlet<sup>16</sup> and the printed newspaper,<sup>17</sup> which was usually issued weekly or semi-weekly, and which may more accurately be described as a periodic pamphlet,<sup>18</sup> became the primary forms of political media.

However, the fact that the knowledge was reformatted as it was

transferred from one medium to another does not seem to have changed its content in any major way.<sup>19</sup> It is for instance hard to detect any commercial adaptation in terms of appeal or format. The letter pamphlet, usually eight pages long, remained the most common format. Only rarely did the authors try to make their texts more appealing by using humour or other stylistic devices. Just as before, there were no images. The probably most noticeable expression of the fact that there were now commercial interests associated with the publication of these texts is the fact that the printers in question—about a dozen in total and primarily working out of Stockholm—do not appear to have paid all that much attention to party political loyalty; instead they printed whatever came their way. Only one printer, Peter Hesselberg, exclusively offered his services to a particular camp (in his case, the pro-French opposition). In terms of timing, and as before, the political texts tended to be concentrated to the parliamentary sessions, which took place every three years—or even more frequently—and often lasted up to a year. The first weeks of the session and the time immediately preceding it seem to have been particularly important. The pattern whereby the number of political publications drastically subsided after and between parliamentary sessions still existed.<sup>20</sup>

Furthermore, the political authors almost exclusively also chose to continue publishing their work anonymously or by using a pseudonym, seemingly uncertain concerning the protections of the new law and well aware of previous political legal actions against unwanted political writers. The anonymous format also had the benefit of enabling the harsh polemics prevalent in the handwritten pamphlets. The genre convention whereby anonymous authors ruthlessly attacked each other's character and motive was here transferred from an older medium—the handwritten and illegal pamphlet circulating by means of loans—to the new medium of the printed, legal and sold pamphlet. These polemics were commonly sarcastic in tone, as when the anonymous Johan Lorens Odhelius praised the French subsidies—a friendly gift that Sweden paid back in the form of the lives of just a few thousand poor subjects, one of Sweden's cheapest export goods.<sup>21</sup>

Another important feature of the texts dealing with the subsidies was that the authors adopted a knowledge-based approach to the subject—clearly characterized by rationalism and empiricism—involving both



definitive claims about the world as well as accompanying instructions for action. This issue was consistently discussed with references to evidence, reason, logic, rationality and truth, and not infrequently with a significant measure of objectivity. The authors pointed out misconceptions, errors and inconsistencies in the arguments of others, while they themselves provided facts in the case supporting their various perspectives. They generally recognized the truth in, for example, historical data concerning past subsidy treaties, while simultaneously pointing out why these data did not undermine their key argument.

The pamphlets were often of an educational, sometimes also authoritative, character. In general, however, this type of knowledge was not presented as exclusive and new, and the reader was expected to be familiar with the subject. It was pointed out that the arguments of the opponents reflected a remarkable level of ignorance, that they in fact could and should possess knowledge concerning, for example, the fact that a minor power such as Sweden needed to align itself with a major power and that the European system of states was bipolar in this respect—that Sweden was really only able to choose between a couple of alternatives. The authors typically laid down a form of social law of nature, which on the basis of rationality either forced Sweden to re-establish its links to France and thereby receive subsidies or once and for all cut off this dependency.<sup>22</sup> For instance, an anti-French author argued that each boy at the school of St. Jacob knew what *Aristarchus* apparently was unable to understand—that Sweden's position had nothing but declined during the last 30 years of being allied with France.<sup>23</sup> Everyone knew, countered a pro-French author, that the French subsidies had enabled the Swedish victories during the Thirty Years War.<sup>24</sup>

An expression of the knowledge-based approach was the tendency to quote, which used to be less common in the earlier handwritten pamphlets. It is easy to conclude that the accuracy and the larger editions brought on by the printed reproductions resulted in increasing requirements in terms of quoting other sources correctly, while it also became more effective to display errors by using direct quotes now that the readers could easily consult their own copies. There were different ways of using quotes. One author for instance chose to bolster his arguments by using a long quote from the minutes of the Council

of the Realm, where the Lord High Chancellor, Axel Oxenstierna (1583–1654), warned about French subsidies and rhetorically asked whether there could possibly be anyone who did not fully understand the deceitfulness of France.<sup>25</sup> Using quotes could also provide a basis for criticism, like when the magazine *Den politiske Aristarchus* ('The Political Aristarchus') critically but correctly quoted the pamphlet *Bref Til en Befullmäktigande i wigtige Ärender* ('Letter to a Member of Parliament Concerning Important Matters'), which had shortly before concluded that war was inevitable as long as the Estates continued to rely on alliances and subsidies. This was not just factually wrong, *Aristarchus* argued, anyone with a knowledge of history knew that there had been a period at the beginning of the century—when Sweden had not been allied with France but instead conformed to an 'unnatural' and 'unfortunate system'—when Sweden's provinces, freedom, armies, reputation and inner strength had been lost. *Aristarchus* was also critical of his antagonist's dishonest ways in terms of his argumentation. There was no reason to try to hide the occasions when France had betrayed Sweden, but there was certainly no reason to 'against all facts' slander an ally, which had also for long periods of time faithfully stood by Sweden, and present this country as a general enemy of Sweden.<sup>26</sup>

The exchange of rhetorical blows brought on by this letter pamphlet is interesting, as it also gives us an insight into just how fast the circulation could take place, which is frequently difficult to ascertain in other cases, as it is rarely possible to date these texts with a high level of accuracy. The pamphlets are usually simply dated with a particular year (in this case 1769). Nevertheless, this particular pamphlet, which initiated this exchange of views, was probably published already in January of this year, as it was addressed in *Den politiske Aristarchus* already at the beginning of February. This is also supported by the fact that the pamphlet resulted in a critical pamphlet in response, which in turn received a response that was just as critical. This final pamphlet in fact contains an exact date (10 February), which is uncommon. The pamphlets were printed in either Stockholm or Uppsala.<sup>27</sup> The Estates were not called to the Diet until 22 April, but the public political debate was already in full swing in terms of shaping the political agenda.

Another common feature of the 1769 texts discussing subsidies

is that they all belong to a political, and very polarized, context. The authors may have looked upon the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance as a question of knowledge, but they were hardly involved in any unbiased quest for knowledge. These texts were without exception politically biased—frequently directly inflammatory—which is noticeable in how they chose facts and perspectives, how they refer to other texts, etcetera. It is illustrative that the authors—despite the protection offered by being anonymous—chose to take a clear position, either for or against the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance, rather than adopting a more problematizing position beyond or between these two views. Here, the exceedingly polarized Swedish (two-)party system of that time clearly limited the form of knowledge being circulated. It was not infrequent that the authors touched upon the great complexities of international relations, even though they still soon resorted back to an unambiguous for or against. Furthermore, behind many of the most important publications (e.g. *Den politiske Aristarchus*, and *Uplysning För Svenska Folket* ('Enlightenment for the Swedish People'), there was also a direct political client with a clear political agenda.<sup>28</sup>

The particular political context also had an effect on how this body of knowledge circulated. Rather than offering their readers a fair and full account, the authors instead commonly chose to focus on some aspect that seemed advantageous to argue against. The common format of the pamphlets—mostly eight pages in quarto—probably contributed to this trend, as it hardly facilitated more nuanced and detailed accounts. Anders Nordencrantz' authoritative book running to several hundred pages, *Tankar Om Krig i gemen Och Sweriges Krig i synnerhet* ('Thoughts Concerning Wars in General and Sweden's Wars in Particular'), the first part of which was published in 1767, was in 1769 only referred to with regard to short fragments and not in a particularly large number of other texts.<sup>29</sup> Nordencrantz' text was perhaps the first to discuss the subsidies more comprehensively, and previous research has often highlighted it as being particularly important for the contemporary debate concerning Swedish foreign policy.<sup>30</sup> The fact that this book does not appear to have had all that much influence over the circulation of knowledge concerning subsidies may therefore seem surprising. However, if we take the mediation into account, perhaps it is not all that remarkable. The texts that resulted in

longer exchanges are instead united by their significantly shorter—and cheaper—format. They were also significantly less overburdened with footnotes and educated digressions than Nordencrantz' opus.

The case of Nordencrantz also serves as a good illustration of a few more general conditions. No single individual or text intervened and made a significant mark on the 1769 circulation of knowledge concerning subsidies. Instead, it was the sheer number of texts suddenly concerned with subsidies that became a part of public political discussions at this time, which is why it is accurate to speak in terms of a public breakthrough for this particular body of knowledge. Furthermore, the form of knowledge circulating in printed media during this year was relatively insular in nature. This means that Nordencrantz' book was atypical also in this regard. On the contrary, the vast majority of Swedish texts rarely looked beyond the Swedish experiences of the last two centuries. But there were exceptions. For instance, one pamphlet critically reminded its readers how Charles II (1630–85) had sold out English interests in exchange for French subsidies.<sup>31</sup> An equally critical pamphlet brought up the argument that both Rome as well as the Persian kings had used subsidies to suppress the Greek states when their arms failed to do so.<sup>32</sup> It was even more unusual that the Swedish texts referred to foreign texts or what authorities such as Samuel von Pufendorf, Christian Wolff and Johann Jacob Moser had to say on the subject. The Swedish texts instead almost exclusively engaged in a dialogue with one another, on the basis of an unambiguous and short-sighted political agenda, and frequently clearly joined—usually already in the title—some clearly identifiable exchange of views, either as the initiating text or as a subsequent text in reply. At the same time, a substantial portion of the texts do not seem to have been circulated nor left any traces whatsoever at the time.

### Knowledge in circulation

With regard to the content and nature of this body of knowledge, we see that it was generally more detailed, as well as in some senses also more analytical, compared to the body of knowledge circulating in handwritten pamphlets thirty years before. In 1769, for example, the readers were told who the two main donors were—France and

Great Britain—and that states such as Denmark and Prussia had also received subsidies. The historical analysis of the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance was detailed. The readers were informed of the birth of the alliance and the important initial treaties signed in Bärwalde in 1631 and in Heilbronn in 1633. The size of the many transactions was discussed, as was the importance of the subsidy alliance for political decision-making in Sweden; for example, how the subsidies had had an impact on Sweden entering the Franco-Dutch War (1672–78), which turned out to be a disaster for Sweden. French subsidies were said to have been spent primarily on military matters, such as fortifications, which would otherwise have been impossible to pay for.<sup>33</sup>

It is striking that the subsidies were not defended as commercial ventures. On the contrary, profit was the basis for criticism and something that the subsidies' opponents used to discredit them. One such text, in answering a recent pro-French proponent of subsidies, scoffed at the Swedish desperation to form long-distance alliances. It sarcastically concluded that Swedish auxiliaries should simply be offered to China and transported to Canton, where they could bring in large subsidies as a garrison.<sup>34</sup> This pamphlet is also an example of how it is possible to identify fragments of an individual text entering public circulation. In a surviving diplomatic report, the British minister in Stockholm, John Goodricke, stated that he 'gave a few guineas to an author to set their [the proponents] position in a ridiculous light ... which he executed with such humour that above 2,000 copies of it were sold in twenty-four hours.'<sup>35</sup> As for the issue of profit, the subsidies, as argued by Peter Wilson, were primarily vehicles for the advancement of political ambitions, such as security or territorial expansion. Only rarely did they provide the recipient state with any type of fiscal profit. More commonly, they in fact resulted in large deficits, as the costs came to far exceed the subsidies.<sup>36</sup> The Swedish authors were aware of this, and those who argued in favour of the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance did so for reasons of politics, arguing that the subsidies lowered Swedish expenditure, even though they did not cover it completely. Some publications also discussed the discrepancy between France's subsidy payments and Sweden's higher outlay—a good illustration of how this body of information circulated as knowledge:

A few days before the opening of the Diet in April 1769, the periodical



*Den politiska Aristarchus* asked how much the Seven Years War had actually cost the Swedish Crown. This question had been raised not long before in the published minutes of the Council of the Realm from 1756, in which an anonymous author named the staggering sum of 70 million daler silvermynt.<sup>37</sup> This was dismissed by *Aristarchus*, claiming that the war had instead cost 62 million. However, the tributes that Sweden had demanded in Prussia must be deducted from this sum, a statement that is supported by a reference to the national audit of 1765.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, French subsidies had covered a considerable portion of the costs. Nevertheless, *Aristarchus* was sceptical, especially of the claim that the subsidies had only covered one-sixth of the costs, and said that the publisher of the Council minutes had not offered any support for this figure or some form of reference.<sup>39</sup>

It did not take long for a reply to be published. An anonymous author, allegedly identical with the publisher of the council minutes, viciously attacked *Aristarchus*. His first line of criticism concerned his antagonist's deliberately misleading ways of reporting others' writings in order to conceal the truth, and he urged everyone to compare the two texts themselves. This was followed by a critical account of his counterpart's calculations, among other things, it was said that the tributes had already been deducted. He had also collected the data on the relatively small French subsidies from the same national audit that served as the basis for *Aristarchus*' calculations—something *Aristarchus* was said to be very well aware of. At the same time, the anonymous author reminded his readers that out of the French subsidies for the war, 10 million livres had still not been paid out, as the Swedish contingent of troops was said to have been smaller than Sweden had initially promised. This was something *Aristarchus* himself had in fact acknowledged in his eighth point (page 32). One should certainly be careful, the author scoffingly reminded his readers, not to forget what you have already said in public. He then went on to the larger question of the socioeconomic costs of the war, which must have exceeded 100 million. One could read about this in several detailed government accounts and documents. He finally challenged *Aristarchus* to refute this calculation if he could, and to have this refutation printed and released to the public—for a simple no was definitely not enough to dismiss his hypothesis.<sup>40</sup>



This debate was linked to the wider issue of the relationship between the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance and the aforementioned socio-economic crisis. Whereas some texts stressed that the subsidies had significantly strengthened Sweden's state finances, others claimed that the subsidies—or more specifically, the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance and the wars it resulted in—were what caused this problem, now and in the past.<sup>41</sup> The pro-French texts objected to what they perceived as an overly narrow perspective on economic utility. One periodical thus attacked the Caps' primary mouthpiece, *Uplysning För Svenska Folket*, for its criticism of the subsidies, which was described as unreasonable. Arguably, a strong defence costs money, but was nevertheless necessary in order not to lose all your possessions. Surely, you made sure to buy both locks and keys to keep thieves out, the author asked rhetorically.<sup>42</sup>

If we adopt a bird's-eye perspective and instead examine the wider truth claims in this body of knowledge, we find a rationalist and mechanistic ontology, which at this time also dominated many other fields of knowledge. As if obeying the laws of Newtonian physics, nation-states were here seen as linked in a self-contained, static, well-ordered and predictable system, like the workings of a machine. Just as in nature, there were natural laws that regulated how the system of nation-states operated. A key aspect of this form of knowledge was the concept of reason of state, *raison d'état*, which assigned various interests to the states—dictated by geopolitical, demographic, and commercial factors—guiding the way they acted and how they related to one another. This system resembled Hobbes' state of nature, in so far as nation-states were all involved in a violent and lawless struggle with one another, which out of necessity compelled them to pursue their own self-interest and reject any form of idealism. What brought some stability to the system was that it was in the common interest of all actors that no individual nation-state, or constellation of nation-states, should be allowed to be powerful enough to dominate part or all of the continent. Before this happened, one could expect that the other European nation-states, acting purely in self-preservation, would mount a united resistance. This mechanism was conceptualized as the balance of power. Any change that might possibly upset the power equilibrium was carefully watched. Every shift of power was seen as

propagating itself throughout the system, forcing the other nation-states to adapt in a never-ending balancing act.<sup>43</sup>

This form of knowledge was expressed in many different ways. One pamphleteer for instance warned about what he had recently read in a newspaper, that the French annexation of Corsica risked fanning the flames of war in Europe, which in turn would presumably spread further—first to the Ottoman Empire, then to Russia, and finally to Sweden. As long as Sweden relied on subsidies and alliances, it would always face this type of risk, being drawn into a war as the result of something peripheral in the system of states.<sup>44</sup> Another author in a typical way based his argument on the anarchy of the system of states and stressed the importance of alliances with faraway powers as a guarantee of good relations with neighbours whose intentions one could never trust; unlike the latter, the former always had a common interest in defending and helping one another.<sup>45</sup> Another pro-French author concurred: of course Sweden, just like any other European state, could not go it alone, without treaties with allies.<sup>46</sup> Two subsequent texts in response strongly opposed the conclusion that Sweden should therefore ally itself with France, but nevertheless agreed on a principal level that this was a ‘political axiom.’<sup>47</sup>

Both those defending and opposing the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance were careful to point out that their opinions were based on an analysis of the best interests of the two countries. One pro-French author admitted that France’s long-term assistance to Sweden had been based on its own self-interest, which was absolutely natural. In fact, it would be foolish to think that states or princes ever acted for any other reason, or that friendships between states reflected anything but shared political interests.<sup>48</sup> The same form of knowledge prompted an author critical of subsidies to conclude, after a long historical account, that France always acted solely in its own interest: ‘However, I wonder not at this. It is so natural that it is ignorant to convince oneself and others that the matter is different.’ The same author argued that for this reason one should not talk in terms of natural friends or enemies at all. These two terms were commonly used in this way, but gave a misleading picture of the nature of international relations.<sup>49</sup>

In these polemics, we can also see traces of a different and conflicting

form of knowledge, which instead viewed international relations in terms of moral rationality, and explained the giving and receiving of subsidies as expressions of friendship and loyalty or deceit and envy. This body of knowledge only had a few clear advocates and thus primarily circulated in the form of refuted knowledge. Interestingly, one exception was the important Cap magazine *Uplysning För Svenska Folket*, which pronounced the relationships between nation-states and individuals to be much the same: just as traits such as being helpful and sincere formed the basis of a friendship, traits such as reluctance and deceit could also destroy the said friendship. This analogy may appear foolish, the author concurred, but it was nevertheless true, as history showed.<sup>50</sup> Here it should be noted that the older form of knowledge, which explained war and peace as extensions of human sin and divine intervention—with the purpose of communicating a normative moral order to the populace—and which still existed in a few other contexts, was here entirely absent.

However, the underlying claim concerning the primacy of the interests of the state in no way settled the political matter at hand. The authors opposed to the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance did so based on this perspective. For example, several authors linked the subsidies to trade policy and suggested that Sweden should instead orient itself towards Great Britain. The Swedish trade surplus with Great Britain was said to be three times larger than the French subsidies had been. At the same time, Sweden was also said to have a large trade deficit with France, which also far exceeded the subsidies.<sup>51</sup> However, the opponents' strongest argument was that France's primary interest was to hold Russia in check, with Swedish assistance, and by extension Russia's Habsburg ally. This was the absolute opposite of Sweden's primary interest, which was said to be detente with Russia. In as much as Sweden and France had had any shared interests, they had evaporated as a result of the Franco-Austrian rapprochement of 1756.<sup>52</sup>

This so-called diplomatic revolution was only one of several factors that now fundamentally transformed the international system. By the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, the European states system had become a multipolar system, with France's power on the wane and Prussia and Russia having assumed the status of great powers. Instead of the previous balance of power between France and her enemies

Great Britain and Austria, the states system collapsed into a western and an eastern part, outside which none of the five powers had all that much direct influence. Together, however, they came to dominate the system in a qualitatively new way; a relationship that now gave rise to the concept of the 'great powers.' The role of the second-rate powers, such as Sweden, was heavily reduced as a result. These changes made it increasingly difficult for minor powers to form alliances with the great powers, which is why the importance of the nation-state's own instruments of power instead increased. The reach of the great powers grew at a considerably faster rate. Together, these changes resulted in the disappearance of much of the relative predictability and stability that had characterized the states system hitherto; the most obvious result being the partitions of Poland.<sup>53</sup>

However, with the exception of Franco-Austrian detente, these changes were nowhere to be seen in the knowledge circulating in Sweden. For example, the authors continued to refer to the old accepted knowledge concerning a European balance of power, albeit including the fact that Great Britain had now taken over the traditional role of the Habsburg Empire as a counterweight to France. Nor is the new concept of the great powers found in the Swedish texts. The fact that Russia's power had increased very rapidly, and now far exceeded Sweden's, was considered indisputable. However, the knowledge that the states system also guaranteed a regional balance of power—that no single power would be allowed to dominate a region such as the Baltic—was still regarded as authoritative. The authors were also unable to see how Great Britain, despite its newfound strength and its successes in the Seven Years War, now actually had far less influence in the Baltic region than it had had earlier in the eighteenth century, as a result of its withdrawal from continental affairs and its focus on colonial consolidation. In a similar manner, obsolete knowledge continued to circulate in the texts. Nowhere, however, was the inability to see how reality had changed greater than in the case of France. For someone in 1769 getting all of his or her knowledge of international relations from the Swedish print media, it would have been impossible to understand just how much France's military, political, and financial influence and prestige had declined since the Seven Years War, to the point of evaporating

altogether in eastern Europe. Not a single author—not even any of those opposed to the Franco-Swedish subsidy alliance—appears to have doubted the vast power of France.

### Concluding remarks

So, is it fruitful to analyse the processes and moments when public access to a particular body of knowledge and its communication increased significantly, even in an early modern context? I would argue that it is, but that it also has its limitations in terms of methodology. Nor is it difficult to understand why the circulation perspective has only rarely been applied to the public politics of the period, this in spite of its proponents, most notably Robert Darnton, whose ‘multi-media feedback system’ for all intents and purposes corresponds to the circulation perspective discussed here.<sup>54</sup> A particularly difficult aspect is following knowledge circulation beyond the print media, when the available traces lead to the handwritten or even oral dimensions of the public sphere, which then played such an important role. Such an intermedial circulation analysis was a focus in my own doctoral dissertation, even though, generally speaking, it has been uncommon in the Swedish historiography of the eighteenth-century public sphere.<sup>55</sup> Instead, it has been usual for the different genres and types of (print) media to have been studied separately, and without privileging the circulation process itself.<sup>56</sup> Neither is it obvious how best to analyse the ways knowledge in individual texts circulated or was received in printed public sources. The source material certainly contains many remnants of this type of circulation. However, these fragments—for example, information that a text was printed in a second edition or resulted in prosecution under the censorship laws—only rarely enable historians to perform a full circulation analysis. Establishing the public impact and influence of specific texts is arguably a difficult task.<sup>57</sup>

Nevertheless, there are also benefits associated with a circulation analysis. The most important perhaps is that it draws attention to something that may perhaps be a truism, but which has rarely had any analytical consequences in practice, namely that the political public sphere of this time comprised not only the print media, but also other types of media, practices, sites, and actors. This is why we



also need to consider other periods and sources than the ones that usually spring to mind. By highlighting the handwritten pamphlets, for example, it becomes clear that the breakthrough of public knowledge considered here was both more gradual and more complex—and can be attributed to other factors than the ending of censorship in 1766. On the contrary, circulation analysis shows that there may be reasons for problematizing this periodization of Swedish historiography. The analysis demonstrates that even though political knowledge was being mediated in a new way at this time—which undoubtedly increased its public impact—its circulation was in many respects characterized by a high degree of continuity.

A focus on the political knowledge in public circulation also has the potential to enrich the historiography of early modern politics. For a long time, Swedish historians have largely been interested in these types of authoritative assumptions concerning the world, which also created the framework for political opinion and action. However, the focus has primarily been on the content of the political perceptions—the concept of knowledge has rarely been used—and the conceptual origin of the ideas. An analytical shift towards questions concerning the public circulation of knowledge would here constitute a valuable, perhaps even necessary, complement. Without empirical understanding of how and where in the public sphere such knowledge circulated, at what frequency and intensity, and for how long, one cannot say that the former type of study has reached its full potential. For example, the fact that (a certain type of) knowledge concerning these subsidies and international politics circulated with a high frequency and intensity and suddenly emerged in 1769 is not insignificant for someone trying to understand the contemporary decision-making process regarding foreign policy. The same may be said of someone studying the ongoing democratization process—the group knowing of this important political dimension, and thus in a position to lay claim on a much more comprehensive citizenship, was almost certainly much larger and more heterogeneous than in the past.

I say almost certainly, because at this point we are approaching the limits of what this sort of circulation analysis is able to accomplish empirically. Studying the public communication of a particular body of knowledge and the public access to it—one might say the public supply



of knowledge—should not be confused with the public impact of this knowledge or even the demand for it. Here we encounter some of the problems already mentioned, such as the difficulties determining the size of the editions, the number of readers or listeners per copy, the social profile of the readers or listeners, and so on. To what extent these analysed texts actually found their way to readers and listeners, and the outcome of this encounter, are some of the questions that elude a closer empirical analysis. It must suffice to remember that the analysed texts were essentially propaganda, and primarily followed a political, rather than a commercial, logic. That is why a high public frequency and intensity among those most affected does not necessarily mean that the demand was as great.

Obviously, the analysis also becomes much more uncertain whenever we take a step back and look at society at large and the role of knowledge therein. This is certainly the case when it comes to the early modern period. And yet the knowledge history project should not flinch from doing so. Here the circulation of public knowledge constitutes an important first step.

## Notes

- 1 The research for this essay received support from the Crafoord Foundation and the Wahlgrenska Foundation. Johan Östling & David Larsson Heidenblad, 'Cirkulation—Ett kunskapshistoriskt nyckelbegrepp', *Historisk tidskrift* 137/2 (2017).
- 2 James A. Secord, 'Knowledge in Transit', *Isis* 95/4 (2004); Andreas W. Daum, 'Varieties of Popular Science and the Transformations of Public Knowledge: Some Historical Reflections', *Isis* 100/2 (2009).
- 3 David Larsson Heidenblad, 'Framtidskunskap i cirkulation: Gösta Ehrensvärds diagnos och den svenska framtidsdebatten, 1971–1972', *Historisk tidskrift* 135/4 (2015); David Larsson Heidenblad, 'Ett ekologiskt genombrott? Rolf Edbergs bok och det globala krismedvetandet i Skandinavien 1966', *Historisk tidskrift* 95/2 (2016).
- 4 Peter H. Wilson, 'The German "Soldier Trade" of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries: A Reassessment', *International History Review* 18/4 (1996), 772; Patrik Winton, 'Parliamentary Control, Public Discussions and Royal Autonomy: Sweden, 1750–1780', *Histoire & Mesure* 30/2 (2015); Erik Bodenstein, *Politikens drivfjäder: Frihetstidens partiberättelser och den moralpolitiska logiken* (Lund: Historiska institutionen, 2016), 132–4; Erik Bodenstein, 'The Problems with Receiving Subsidies: Sweden and the Lesser Powers in the Long Eighteenth Century', in Svante Norrhem & Erik Thomson (eds.), *Subsidies, War, and Peace: Financial Transactions and Political Influence in Early Modern Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2018).

- 5 Bodensten, *Politikens drivfjäder*, ch. 3, also *passim*.
- 6 Ibid. 163ff.
- 7 Ibid. 132ff; Anders Burius, *Ömhet om friheten: Studier i frihetstidens censurspolitik* (Uppsala: Institution för idé- och lärdomshistoria, 1984).
- 8 Arndt Öberg, *De yngre mössorna och deras utländska bundsförvanter 1765–1769: Med särskild hänsyn till de kommersiella och politiska förbindelserna med Storbritannien, Danmark och Preussen* (Stockholm: Svenska Bokförlag 1970); Michael F. Metcalf, *Russia, England and Swedish Party Politics 1762–1766: The Interplay between Great Power Diplomacy and Domestic Politics during Sweden's Age of Liberty* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1977); Marie-Christine Skuncke, 'Medier, mutor och nätverk', in Marie-Christine Skuncke & Henrika Tandefelt (eds.), *Riksdag, kaffehus och predikstol: Frihetstidens politiska kultur, 1766–1772* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2003); Marie-Christine Skuncke, 'Press and Political Culture in Sweden at the End of the Age of Liberty', in Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink & Jeremy D. Popkin (eds.), *Enlightenment, Revolution and the Periodical Press* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2004).
- 9 See, for example, Jonas Nordin, *1766 års tryckfrihetsförordning: Bakgrund och betydelse* (Stockholm: Kungliga biblioteket, 2015).
- 10 *Kongl. Maj:ts Nådige Förordning, Angående Skrift- och Tryck-friheten; Gifwen Stockholm i Råd-Cammaren then 2. Decembr. 1766* (Stockholm: Tryckt uti Kongl. Tryckeriet, 1766), §3.
- 11 See Winton, 'Parliamentary Control'.
- 12 James C. Riley, *The Seven Years War and the Old Regime in France: The Economic and Financial Toll* (Princeton: PUP, 1986); Franz A. J. Szabo, *The Seven Years War in Europe, 1756–1763* (Harlow: Pearson, 2008); Hamish Scott, 'The Seven Years War and Europe's Ancien Régime', *War in History* 18/4 (2011); Patrik Winton, 'Sweden and the Seven Years War, 1757–1762: War, Debt and Politics', *War in History* 19/1 (2012).
- 13 Jan Herlitz, 'Nordencrantz, Christiernin och den monetära debatten på 1760-talet', in Skuncke and Tandefelt *Riksdag, kaffehus och predikstol*, 131–42; Winton, 'Parliamentary Control'.
- 14 See also Östling & Larsson Heidenblad, 'Cirkulation', 283–4.
- 15 See Bodensten, *Politikens drivfjäder*, 48–53, 123–154.
- 16 See Anna Gustafsson, *Pamfletter! En diskursiv praktik och dess strategier i tidig svensk politisk offentlighet* (Lund: Språk- och litteraturcentrum, Lunds universitet, 2009).
- 17 See Claes-Göran Holmberg, Ingemar Oscarsson & Jarl Torbacke, *Den svenska pressens historia, i: I begynnelsen (tiden före 1830)* (Stockholm: Ekerlid, 2000), 150–3; Ingemar Oscarsson, "'Rikets frihet, borgerlig frihet, skrif-frihet': Gjörwell och Den politiske Aristarchus 1769–72', in Skuncke & Tandefelt, *Riksdag, kaffehus och predikstol*, 315–38.
- 18 Skuncke, 'Press and political culture', 87.
- 19 Cf. Johan Östling, 'Vad är kunskapshistoria', *Historisk tidskrift* 135/1 (2015).
- 20 For the people and commercial interests involved, see Bo Bennich-Björkman, 'Affärer i politiskt tryck: Offentlighetsprincipen och spelet om den politiska makten 1766–72', in Skuncke & Tandefelt, *Riksdag, kaffehus och predikstol*.
- 21 [Johan Lorens Odhelius], *Bref Til Författaren af Swaret uppå et Betydeligit Bref ifrån*

- en Wän i Stockholm (Angående Alliance-Wärket) Tryckt hos Peter Hesselberg* (Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, 1769), 1–4.
- 22 For example, *Kärnan Af Några Riksdags-Mål* (Upsala: Johan Edman, 1769); [Christian Habbaeus von Lichtenstern/Daniel Helsingius], *En Svensk Mans Tankar Om Dess Fädernes-lands Tilstånd, År 1675: Öfversättning ifrån Latin, Med korta Anmärkningar, lämpade til närwarande tid* (Stockholm: Carl Stolpe, 1769); [Anders Schönberg], *Bref til en Wän, I anledning af et i Upsala tryckt Bref til en Befullmäktigande I Wigtiga Ärender* (Stockholm: Peter Hesselberg, 1769); *Under På Den så kallade Svenska Patriotiska Under-Stolen* (Stockholm: Peter Hesselberg, 1769).
  - 23 [Lichtenstern/Helsingius], *En Svensk*, 9–10.
  - 24 [Anders Odel], *Echo och Återskall På Uplysningen för Svenska Folket Om Anledningen, Orsaken och Afsigten med Urtima Riksdagen 1769* (Stockholm: Peter Hesselberg, 1769), n.p. [10].
  - 25 [Johan Hartman Eberhardt], *Sweriges Rikes Naturliga och Sanskyldiga Interesse uti Förbund med Kronan Frankrike, Granskat Uti Bref Ifrån En Wän i Stockholm til des Correspondent I anledning Af hans Swar På Des förra betydliga Bref* (Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet; Hos Johan Arvid Carlbohm, 1769), 19–20.
  - 26 *Den politiske Aristarchus* (Stockholm: Peter Hesselberg, 1769–70), 9–12, nos. 2–3; *Bref Til en Befullmäktigande i wigtige Ärender* (Upsala: Johan Edman, Kongl. Acad. Boktr., 1769).
  - 27 *Den politiske Aristarchus; Bref Til en Befullmäktigande*; [Schönberg], *Bref*.
  - 28 Holmberg, Oscarsson & Torbacke, *Den svenska pressens historia*, 151; Oscarsson, “Rikets frihet”, 320–1; Skuncke, ‘Press and political culture’, 91–2.
  - 29 [Anders Nordencrantz], *Tankar Om Krig i gemen Och Sweriges Krig i synnerhet, Samt Hwaruti Sweriges Rätta och Sanskyldiga Interesse består: Skrifwit År 1758, och hörer til et Större Wärk, som på Hög Wederbörlig Befallning blifwit Författadt, men icke förr kunnat komma i Dagsljuset. Första Delen* (Stockholm: Lorens Ludvig Grefing, 1767).
  - 30 For example, Olof Jägerskiöld, *Den svenska utrikespolitikens historia*, II:2: 1721–1792 (Stockholm: Norstedt, 1957), 36; Jonas Nordin, ‘L’esprit de paix ou la naissance d’une opposition contre la guerre en Suède au XVIIIe siècle’, *Revue d’histoire Nordique—Nordic Historical Review* 14/1 (2012): 113–115.
  - 31 [Odhelius], *Bref*, 1.
  - 32 [Eberhardt], *Sweriges*, 9.
  - 33 For example, *Den politiske Aristarchus*; [Eberhardt], *Sweriges*; [Lichtenstern/Helsingius], *En Svensk*; [Odel], *Echo; Partiers Ursprung och Wärfkan I Sverige* (Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, hos Johan Arvid Carlbohm, 1769); [Esbjörn Christian Reuterholm], *Uplysning För Svenska Folket Om Anledningen, Orsaken och Afsigterne Med Urtima Riksdagen 1769* (Stockholm: Carl Stolpe, 1769); [Erik Stenius], *Bref Til En Utlänning, Om Mössornas Ursprung Och Upförande In til Närwarande Tid: Skrifwen 1765. Och Fortsatt til Närwarande Tider. Andra Uplagan* (Stockholm: Lars Wennberg, 1769).
  - 34 [Odhelius], *Bref*, 5–6.
  - 35 Quoted in Skuncke, ‘Press and political culture’, 92.
  - 36 Wilson, “The German “Soldier Trade”.”
  - 37 *Protocoll, Hållit i Kongl. Maj:ts Råd-Kammare Den 2 November 1756, Om Sweriges*

- Rikes Då warande tilstånd Och Wädeliga belägenhet* (Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, 1769), 6.
- 38 *Secrete utskottets til riksens ständer uppgifne berättelse om stats-werkets tilstånd* (Stockholm: Lorens Ludvig Grefing, 1765).
- 39 *Den politiske Aristarchus*, no. 12.
- 40 [E. M. Bromell], *Swar, Uti Bref til Aristarchus, På Dess 12:te Nummer den 13 April 1769* (Stockholm: Kongl. Finska Boktryckeriet, 1769).
- 41 For example, [Eberhardt], *Sweriges*; [Odel], *Echo*, nos. 9–12; [Reuterholm], *Uplysning*, 54–8; [Carl Johan Strand], *Tankar Af En Landsbo Til Dess Wän I Stockholm* (Stockholm: Johan Georg Lange, 1769), 6.
- 42 [Odel], *Echo*, no. 11.
- 43 Peter H. Wilson, 'War in German Thought from the Peace of Westphalia to Napoleon', *European History Quarterly* 28/1 (1998), 8–22; Jeremy Black, *European International Relations 1648–1815* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), 6–9; H. M. Scott, *The Birth of a Great Power System 1740–1815* (Harlow: Pearson, 2006), 138–40.
- 44 *Bref Til en Befullmäktigande*.
- 45 *Under På Den så kallade*.
- 46 [Carl Eric Wadenstierna], *Swar Uppå et Betydeligit Bref Ifrån En Wän i Stockholm* (Stockholm: Peter Hesselberg, 1769), n.p.
- 47 [Eberhardt], *Sweriges*, 8; [Odhelius], *Bref*, 4.
- 48 *Kärnan*, 5–6.
- 49 [Eberhardt], *Sweriges*, 10, 18.
- 50 [Reuterholm], *Uplysning*, 61.
- 51 [Reuterholm], *Uplysning*, 67; [Lichtenstern/Helsingius], *En Svensk*, 11.
- 52 [Eberhardt], *Sweriges*; [Lichtenstern/Helsingius], *En Svensk*; [Reuterholm], *Uplysning*.
- 53 Scott, *The Birth*, 35–8, 117–21, 143–50.
- 54 Robert Darnton, 'An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris', *American Historical Review* 105/1 (2000).
- 55 Bodensten, *Politikens drivfjäder*. See, however, Jonas Nordin, *Frihetstidens monarki: Konungamakt och offentlighet i 1700-talets Sverige* (Stockholm: Atlantis, 2009); Annie Mattsson, *Komediant och riksförrädare: Handskriftscirkulerade smädeskrifter mot Gustaf III* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2010).
- 56 For example, Magnus Nyman, *Press mot friheten: Opinionsbildning i de svenska tidningarna och åsiktsbrytningar om minoriteter 1772–1786* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 1988); Peter Hallberg, *Ages of Liberty: Social Upheaval, History Writing and the New Public Sphere in Sweden, 1740–1792* (Stockholm: University of Stockholm, 2003); Gustafsson, 'Pamfletter'; Tilda Maria Forselius, *God dag, min läsare! Bland berättare, brevskrivare, boktryckare och andra bidragsgivare i tidig svensk veckopress 1730–1773* (Lund: Ellerströms, 2015). The same can be said of later periods, see Jonas Harvard & Patrik Lundell, '1800-talets medier: System, landskap, nätverk', in eid. (eds.), *1800-talets mediesystem* (Stockholm: Kungliga biblioteket, 2010).
- 57 See also Larsson Heidenblad's essay in this volume.