

Chapter 21 : The Legacy.

The biographers have had a hard time handling Oscar. Andreas Tjerneld's article in the Swedish biographical dictionary (1992) is typical in this respect. More a monument to Oscar than a portrayal of a living person & at the end a condemnation:

O was a product of his times but did not leave any lasting impression, nor does he count among the great kings. The contrast between his vacillation and the deeds of Charles John is striking, and there is no doubt that he bequeathed a weakened royal power to his sons. With his soft, refined but lofty essence he also failed to achieve a broad popularity in the manner of the boisterous folksy Charles XV. ... Through his reform efforts of the 1840s, albeit within the framework of an anachronistic approach to enlightened despotism, [however] O undoubtedly contributed to significant and long-term changes in Swedish society.

Over time Oscars' legacy has deteriorated still further. What is laid at his door is that in the spirit of the new age he wanted to be both king and politician. I quote from a section of the recent Swedish national history where Oscar's rein is interpreted according to Habermas theories on the bourgeois public sphere replacing elite rule:

Oscar I has been described in so many different ways that he resembles a chameleon. Some saw him as a borderline fanatic and Jacobin, others as weak and indulgent. He was described as a cold tactician and schemer, who avoided head on conflicts, but never let go, out-waiting and out-wearying his opponents by postponing decisions, meandering between parties and stirring up discontent without his power diminishing. After the Crimean War, his position was so strong despite the setback, that Finance Minister J.A. Gripenstedt in an anonymous series - probably without foundation - warned of plans for royal autocracy. He was initially a reformer but with the ambition to continue his father's "self rule". That ambition did not diminish when the drive for reform slowed.

Oscar I had a sense of what was moving in time. Many felt confused with these new and obscure slogans such as democracy, politics, revolution, republic, socialism and communism. Not he. The words had not yet acquired the meaning and importance of our time, but were open to different interpretations. »We want a republic, but with a *real* king,» shouted the crowd at Storkyrkobrinken during the March riots in 1848. Many associated democracy with mob rule and the guillotine. The king followed the debate. His view of the newspapers alternated between total contempt and uncritical respect. Through his good press contacts, he played the old aristocracy of the blood against the new aristocracy of the stock exchange paying journalists to do his bidding.

The King mastered the game of manipulating public opinion. He had inherited his father's private office, the King's Bureau, which was responsible for the personal and official correspondence both inland and abroad. Through this agency he subscribed to a number of Swedish, Norwegian, Danish, German, French and British newspapers. The missions also sent press clips. Charles John selected articles in foreign newspaper that he considered suitable reading for the Swedish people and had them translated and distributed for printing in the Swedish press. Oscar I continued this activity, but to a greater extent and more systematically. Unlike his father, he also understood that fresh news was better than old. He analysed the papers, sought to establish their nature and planted messages accordingly. Senior officials and private individuals, such as Baron Knut Bonde, who was head of the Royal Theatre, were used as intermediaries. Bonde

bragged about being able to unleash his newspaper dogs on troublemakers of every ilk. Oscar's relations with the radical scandal newspapers *Söndagsbladet* and *Folkets röst* were excellent. *Söndagsbladet* (the Sunday Paper) was the organ of the poor classes, appreciated, among other things, for the police court reporting. *Folkets röst* (the Voice of the People) constantly attacked the aristocracy of the stock exchange and the grand bourgeois where liberalism had its main supporters. Lars Johan Hierta was time and again assaulted for a contract with a worker at his factory in Barnängen, »the Starvation contract». Unclear at what grounds At the same time, *Folkets röst* supported conservative values such as religion and family, praised the king and the crown prince and ran royal propaganda.

Oscar I closely followed the foreign press. Before and during the Crimean War, he managed to anonymously or under pseudonym publish articles in the *Times*. Through frontmen he had contacts with the telegram agency Havas, through which articles could be inserted into a variety of newspapers without the origin being known. Then the articles were reused as foreign references in the inland debate.

As royal power in this way both sought out and was drawn into the scene of the new public, the remaining references to King of God's grace became increasingly empty rhetoric, and the principle of the exercise of power through invisibility and distance became increasingly untenable. The kings councillors started imitating him. This became increasingly apparent in the course of foreign policy activism during the 1850s and 1860s. when the governments of the Union openly opposed royal policy. This was particularly evident in the Danish crisis of 1863. A little later, Charles XV was forced into a similar game of opinion manipulation in connection with the issue of representation. In exchange for supporting the reform, he sought public support for a Scandinavian crown.

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Charles XIV John, Oscar I and Charles XV were, as the historian Göran B Nilsson has put it, political double players who kept all exits open. Charles John stayed in the background, but his successors were theatre kings on the public stage of the emerging bourgeoisie. The Bernadotte Party mingled with a growing number of players in a public space that became increasingly narrow.¹

My belief is that the Swedish historians have not grasped the meaning of Oscar's role as enlightened monarch. This is usually seen as a phase in the transition between autocracy and parliamentarianism, as an attempt to place the autocracy of God's grace on a secular basis by emphasizing its state utility. An enlightened bourgeois monarch could push through all these reforms that the Estates had blocked. Which was exactly what Oscar was aiming for.² In the interpretation of the surroundings, however, all reforms were *ipso facto* liberal victories. There is a certain comedy in that Oscar was supposedly in favour of a parliamentary system of government because of his reforming attitude, in the same way that his father was supposedly a Republican at heart because of his Jacobin past.

¹ Stråht, 2010: ss. 145-149.

² Bluche 1968.