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Rhetorics of Democracy: Swedish Social Democracy and the Concept of Democracy during the Interwar Years

Session: Red Rhetoric: Perspectives on the Political Concepts of Nordic Labor Movements

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The paper shows how the Swedish Social Democrats redefined and used the concept of democracy after the introduction of universal suffrage. The analysis focuses on composite concepts of democracy – e.g. political democracy and economic democracy – and argues that the usage of these concepts had the advantage of avoiding conceptual ambiguity but that it simultaneously resulted in temporal tensions within the concept. While political democracy denoted something already existing, i.e. universal suffrage, other conceptualizations of democracy pointed towards the more utopian goals of the party.

Based on the empirical findings, the paper argues that the today common definition of democracy as voting-rights is a too narrow definition if the historical agents are to be taken seriously. Within the research on democratization and Interwar democracy the rhetorical aspects of democracy has to a large degree been ignored. In fact, to many of the agents participating in the struggle for (what they understood as) democracy the introduction of universal suffrage in 1919/1921 – which is commonly referred to as ‘the democratic breakthrough of Sweden’ – was not seen as the end of the democratization process, it was merely the beginning.