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0521531330 - A Stagnating Metropolis: The Economy and Demography of Stockholm, 1750-1850

Johan Soderberg, Ulf Jonsson and Christer Persson

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Introduction

The economic history of Stockholm can be divided into five major phases.

1 The medieval town developed from a bastion strategically situated at the point where the lake Mälaren meets the Baltic. Already during medieval times the trade in iron, exported from the Bergslagen iron-producing districts, was important. German merchants had dominated economic life for a long time.

Though Sweden entered a new stage in her history after the establishment of a strong national state during the reign of Gustavus Vasa from the 1520s onwards, Stockholm's economy did not change dramatically during the sixteenth century. The population in 1582 can be estimated at 8,000.¹ The town still was of a largely medieval character.

2 The expansive bureaucratic town of the seventeenth-century Great Power era. The reforms of Gustavus Adolphus, starting in the 1620s, were accompanied by a spectacular strengthening of the central administration and the military. The capital also dominated foreign trade. The population in 1674 has been estimated at between 50,000 and 55,000, a roughly fivefold increase since 1620.² Stockholm's development during the seventeenth century was similar to that of Madrid, Vienna, Berlin, and Copenhagen, for example. From a European perspective, Stockholm was a more prominent city then than it was during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The first decades of the eighteenth century, the final part of the Great

¹ B. Lager, *Stockholms befolkning på Johan III:s tid* (Stockholm, 1962).

² G. Utterström, 'Stockholms folkmängd 1663-1763', in *Historiska studier tillägnade Nils Ahnlund* (Stockholm, 1949).

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Power era (the Great Nordic War ending in 1721), was a period of strain. The plague of 1710, the largest demographic disaster in the history of the capital, is estimated to have killed 18,000 people.

3 The stagnation period of the century following 1750 is the subject of this volume. Stockholm encountered serious growth problems, with economic development lagging behind that of the country as a whole.

4 The industrializing city of the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In connection with strong immigration, population grew rapidly from 93,000 in 1850 to 301,000 in 1900 and 502,000 in 1930. In contrast with the manufactures of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the emergent leading industries, mechanical engineering and the printing industry, were far more intensive in the use of capital and skills. Real wages and standards of living improved much. Within the working class there was a shift from unskilled to more skilled labour.

5 The post-industrial city of today, where employment is to a large extent within the public sector. The service sector has grown, while industrial activities have largely been located outside the administrative boundaries of the city. From about World War I onwards, the proportion of the population in the industrial sector of the capital has steadily declined. Since 1950, more than half of the active population has been working in public services and trade.³

This volume deals with the economic history of Stockholm during phase 3 above, the long period of economic and demographic stagnation from the mid eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century.

Several valuable studies of the economic and social history of Stockholm take the mid nineteenth century as their starting point.⁴ There are some good reasons for doing so. A new type of census, a major source of Swedish demographic research, began in 1860. Somewhat later an improvement in the registration of the population was

³ G. Ahlberg, *Stockholms befolkningsutveckling efter 1850* (Stockholm, 1958), 127. For an overview of Stockholm's history see S. Högberg, *Stockholms historia 1-2* (Stockholm, 1981).

⁴ Major works on the economy and demography of the industrialization period include: I. Hammarström, *Stockholm i svensk ekonomi 1850-1914* (Stockholm, 1970); U. Gustafson, *Industrialismens storstad* (Stockholm, 1976); W. William-Olsson, *Huvudragen av Stockholms geografiska utveckling 1850-1930* (Stockholm, 1937); G. Ahlberg, *Stockholms befolkningsutveckling*; J. Cederquist, *Arbetare i strejk* (Stockholm, 1980); M. Matović, *Stockholmsäktenskap; familjebildning och partnerval i Stockholm 1850-1890* (Stockholm, 1984).

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carried out with the establishment of *rotemansinstitutionen* (1878). Of course, the period 1860–1914 also deserves special attention as the era of rapid and successful industrial and demographic growth, radically transforming the pre-industrial economy.

The preceding stagnation period, covering almost a century, has been analysed far less extensively. Although valuable monographs exist, many aspects of the stagnation period have not been studied.⁵ While it is well known that the quality of that part of population registration, which was administered by the church, was less efficient in Stockholm than in other parts of the country, it has been observed that the capital in other respects exhibits important source materials to which there is no counterpart in most other parts of Sweden. Unlike rural regions there are, for instance, Stockholm registers reporting eighteenth-century real estate valuations. There is also a wealth of information on the wages of labour employed by the municipality. The sources relating to manufacturing are very rich.

There were several aspects to the stagnation period. Economic growth was weak and a process of de-industrialization took place during which much of the largest sector, the textile industry, was closed down. Demographic growth was slow, involving a very high mortality, normally an excess of deaths over births, a declining nuptiality and a rising bastardy rate.

Stockholm was a town where death was never far away. The contrast between love of pleasure and death is a central theme of the greatest Stockholm poet of the time, Carl Michael Bellman (1740–95). Death is always at hand as a liberator from a life which never was worth much. Drinking and gambling in the hectic life of the tavern, his characters are well aware that they are journeying towards the graveyard, ‘the best of ports’. We find a typical symbolic combination in Cornelius, a gravedigger of Maria parish in southern Stockholm, and also the keeper of a nearby tavern. One used to find him snoring in the graveyard, leaning over a child’s coffin with a dusty beer tumbler in his hand. Bellman himself died from tuberculosis, like Father Movitz, one of his Bacchic heroes whose fate he described and feared:

⁵ E. F. Heckscher, *Sveriges ekonomiska historia från Gustav Vasa II:1* (Stockholm, 1949) contains an important discussion of the causes of the stagnation. On foreign trade see S. Högberg, *Utrikeshandel och sjöfart på 1700-talet* (Stockholm, 1969), on handicrafts E. Söderlund, *Stockholms hantverkarklass 1720–1772* (Stockholm, 1943), and Söderlund, *Hantverkarna II* (Stockholm, 1949), and on manufacturing P. Nyström, *Stadsindustriens arbetare före 1800* (Stockholm, 1955, reprinted 1983).

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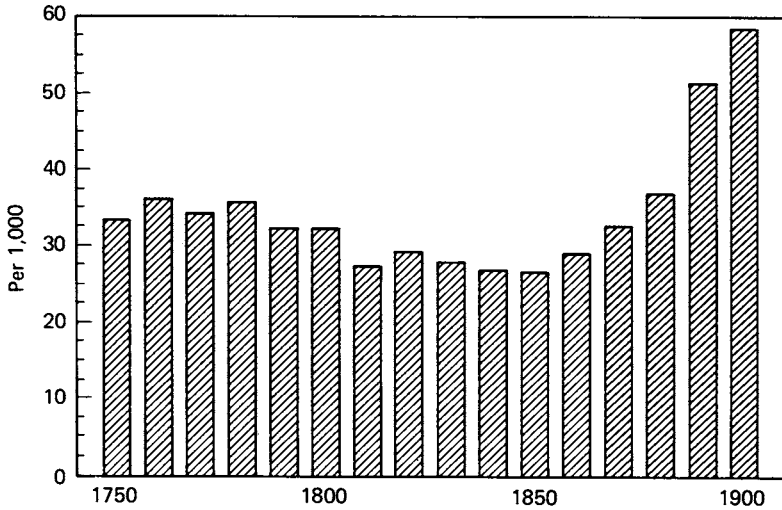
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Figure 1.1 Stockholm's population as a proportion of Sweden's, 1750-1900.

Source: *Statistisk årsbok för Stockholms stad* 38 (1905); *Historisk statistik för Sverige* 1 (Stockholm, 1955), tables A2, A5.

Heaven, thou diest! Each cough with fear inspiring
 hollowly grates, and all thy parts repine.
 White is thy tongue, thy frighten'd heart expiring,
 Muscles and flesh, all soft to death incline.
 Breathe! Ah, preserve us! Such fumes from thy throttle!
 'Cello – Reach me the bottle!
 Movitz, thy health! Skål! Praise the god of wine!⁶

An example from the parish of Katarina, the most proletarian one, is illustrative. So many died there that the graveyard was filled to bursting point; a complaint in 1780 describes it as 'at the southern side exhibiting alternating elevations and depressions from which bones and skulls, as it were, are looking up from the ground'.⁷

As a consequence of slow population growth, Stockholm's share of the population of Sweden decreased between about 1760 and 1850 (figure 1.1). The long stagnation contrasts sharply with late nineteenth-century economic growth.

The economic aspect of the stagnation involved the capital's role as a centre of trade, administration, and manufacturing. Eli Heckscher described how a general decentralization of internal trade took place,

⁶ Translation by Paul Britten Austin, *The Life and Songs of Carl Michael Bellman* (Malmö, 1967). Austin's book is a fine introduction to the life and works of Bellman. Towards the end of his life, Bellman liked to call himself Movitz.

⁷ J. Söderberg, 'Stockholm på 1700-talet: metropol i stagnation', *Folkets Historia* 13 (1985).

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in which Gothenburg and the Finnish coastal towns advanced during the second part of the eighteenth century. The secular westward shift in foreign trade, in which the Baltic declined in importance relative to the Atlantic, also was disadvantageous for Stockholm as a port town.

The regional pattern of agricultural growth had decentralizing effects as well. Agricultural economic growth during the first part of the nineteenth century was stronger in western and southern Sweden than in the lake Mälaren region of which Stockholm was part. The export of oats from the western and southern areas grew rapidly around the mid nineteenth century, whereas the east-central part around the capital, dominated by comparatively large landed estates, developed more slowly and did not experience any notable agricultural growth until the last decades of the century.⁸

The outline of this volume is as follows. Chapter 2 analyses Stockholm's growth problems in a wider European perspective. How typical was the long stagnation of the Swedish capital within the pattern of urban European development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries? Did long-term demographic stagnation and de-industrialization take place elsewhere? The impact of broader processes – shifts in world trade, administrative and military expansion, and interregional competition – on Stockholm's development are traced. Stockholm is also placed within the larger Swedish regional economic and demographic framework.

Chapter 3 deals with one of the most prominent features of the stagnation, the decline of manufacturing. In 1760, half of Swedish manufacturing workers were found in Stockholm; by 1846, this share had declined to only 12 per cent. While previous research has concentrated on the eighteenth century, this chapter traces the number of enterprises, their composition and employment needs up to the mid nineteenth century.

Chapter 4 discusses the development of the informal sector of the economy and the interplay between long-term economic stagnation, labour markets, and demographic behaviour. The concept of the informal sector as used in Third World studies is discussed. An hypothesis of alternating swings in the informal economy is advanced, arguing that a wide range of informal sector activities grew as employment in the formal sector stagnated or declined.

⁸ G. Fridlitzius, *Swedish Corn Exports in the Free Trade Era* (Lund, 1957); S. Martinius, *Agrar kapitalbildning och finansiering 1833–1892* (Gothenburg, 1967); S. Martinius, *Jordbruk och ekonomisk tillväxt i Sverige 1830–1870* (Gothenburg, 1970); J. Söderberg, 'A long-term perspective on regional economic growth in Sweden', *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 32 (1984).

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In chapter 5, trends in real wages are investigated and compared with those of several other European towns. Did the real wages of the unskilled develop more unfavourably in the stagnating Swedish capital than in other European urban centres during the period 1730–1850? What is the relevance of the international standard of living debate, focussing on the period before the mid nineteenth century, to the interpretation of the Stockholm data?

An analysis of real wages cannot be expected to provide more than a clue as to long-term change in living standards. Other materials are used in chapter 6, charting the spatial patterns of wealth and poverty. What parts of the capital were the richest and poorest, and how stable were these patterns? Can levels of poverty be compared with other European towns or with other parts of Sweden? How was the poorest segment of the population composed?

Chapter 7 discusses the long-term trends in inequality. How unevenly were earnings and real estate distributed? Can any long-term tendency towards levelling or widening be discerned? The chapter draws on the wage data on unskilled labour in chapter 5 but also takes the salaried into account.

Demographic phenomena are the focus of chapter 8, which attempts to analyse demographic patterns in relation to the economy. The chapter covers the relationship between the vital series (mortality, fertility, and nuptiality) and economic and climatic fluctuations. How did short-term economic fluctuations affect the fundamental demographic series? Was the Stockholm economic-demographic system of the same low-pressure type as Sweden as a whole?

During the whole period of investigation Stockholm was characterized by a very high level of mortality. The mortality rate, generally above 35 per thousand, was exceptional not only within Sweden. It also surpassed that of European metropolises such as London, Paris, and Berlin, or even British cities such as Manchester and Liverpool.

Chapter 8 also takes a closer look at this pattern of mortality, its age- and sex-specific structure as well as the causes of death, and compares the results with what we know about mortality in other European cities at the time. The traditional interpretation of Stockholm's high mortality rates, which emphasizes the poor sanitary conditions, is challenged.

The concluding chapter 9 summarizes the previous discussion and points to some unsolved problems.

In summary, chapters 2 and 3 emphasize the causes of stagnation, while the other chapters look more into its effects. However, the

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distinction between causes and effects is not a simple one. They are inextricably interwoven.

We believe that research on the economic history of Stockholm benefits from a European perspective that attempts to take similarities as well as differences into account. As yet we are far from a general picture of the conditions in which urban Europe was transformed during this period. Such a picture will have to combine the analysis of global or general processes with those of local ones, specific to each town. Most research so far has underestimated the importance of economic processes acting in Europe as a whole during a large part of the eighteenth century, processes tending to produce similar effects in terms of trends in real wages and inequality in many urban centres. This is argued in chapter 5, for instance. On the other hand, Stockholm's situation is also peculiar and unique in many respects. We have tried to point to what we find to be broader features as well as particularities. It will be evident that systematic comparison can often be carried out only with demographic data, and only because of the lively research in historical demography during the last decades, whereas many non-demographic phenomena are still waiting to be explored.⁹

⁹ This volume does not aim to provide an introduction to general Swedish economic and social history. One of the best introductions in English remains E. F. Heckscher, *An Economic History of Sweden* (Cambridge, Mass., 1954). The recent Swedish handbook, G. Behre *et al.*, *Sveriges historia 1521–1809* (Stockholm, 1985) is very useful.

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Stockholm's growth problems, 1760–1850, in a comparative European perspective

A comparative view of European urban history

This chapter discusses the growth problems of Stockholm 1760–1850 in a comparative European perspective. The main questions posed are: How unique is the long-term stagnation of Stockholm? How often do we elsewhere observe a de-industrialization process of the kind that Stockholm experienced?

Within the field of urban history there has been a shift in perspective in recent years. Philip Abrams pleaded for a point of view according to which towns are seen as social forms where social relations are intensified and concentrated. This means a reorientation from the treatment of the town as a sort of independent variable in the analysis of historical change. An earlier line of research is illustrated by the debate of the 1950s on the effects of 'parasitic' or 'regenerative' cities on their environments. Parasitic towns, exemplified by St Petersburg or by rapidly growing Third World centres, were supposed to have had negative development effects while the contrary applied to the external effects of regenerative cities, culturally as well as economically.¹

The debate around this pair of opposites clarified little. Researchers increasingly seem to have realized the complexity of the phenomena under study. It is true that old differences in opinions still exist; we

¹ P. Abrams, 'Towns and economic growth: some theories and problems', in: *Towns in Societies*, eds. P. Abrams and E. A. Wrigley (Cambridge, 1979). For the discussion of the 1950s see B. Hoselitz, 'Generative and parasitic cities', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 3 (1954/5). A useful overview of the literature is provided by A. Gilbert and J. Gugler, *Cities, Poverty and Development; Urbanization in the Third World* (Oxford, 1982), chapter 1.

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Table 2.1 *Percentage population growth in 61 European towns, 1750-1800 and 1800-1850.*

Growth 1750-1800	Growth 1800-1850		Total
	<50 %	≥50 %	
<30 %	14	15	29
≥30 %	9	23	32
Total	23	38	61

Sources: Data for 1750 mainly from T. Chandler and G. Fox, *3 000 Years of Urban Growth* (New York, 1974), 18, 21, supplemented by C. M. Law, 'Some notes on the urban population of England and Wales in the eighteenth century', *Local Historian* 10 (1972). For 1850 B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics* (London, 1975), 76-8, supplemented by Mitchell, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), 24-6.

have only to recall Fernand Braudel's reference to the antiurbanism of Rousseau ('it is the big cities that drain the state of its resources and give rise to its weakness') and compare it with the British historian, Martin Daunton's, reference to Adam Smith's opposite view ('through the greater part of Europe the commerce and manufacture of the cities, instead of being the effect, have been the cause and occasion of the improvement and cultivation of the country').² Nonetheless there seems to be widespread agreement that straight questions concerning economic growth effects, once prominent in the discussion on the Industrial Revolution and Third World problems, are not necessarily the most relevant to historical analysis, at least not when dealing with units smaller than nations.

An overview of the urban development in the century after 1750 must depart from population trends. The economic series available are far from sufficient. Demographic growth is of course not a perfect indicator of economic development but we should still expect them to be clearly and positively correlated. Weak population growth in general corresponds to weak economic growth.

The 61 European towns in table 2.1 include all with a total population of at least 50,000 in 1750, or 70,000 in 1800, or 90,000 in 1850.

² F. Braudel, *Les structures du quotidien: le possible et l'impossible* (Paris, 1979), chapter 8; the Rousseau quotation from *Emile*. M. J. Daunton, 'Towns and economic growth in eighteenth-century England', in: Abrams and Wrigley, *Towns and Societies*; the Smith quotation from *Wealth of Nations*.

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They are divided into four categories with regard to growth during the subperiods 1750–1800 and 1800–50.

Out of the 61 towns, 14 were slow growers during both subperiods. Stockholm belongs to this group as do Copenhagen, Königsberg, and Amsterdam, all of which were part of the Baltic trading area which was declining in importance relative to the Atlantic. Most other towns in the group are Spanish and Italian centres such as Genoa, Venice, Florence, Bologna, Rome, and Granada, affected by the long-term urban stagnation in the Mediterranean region.³

A group of nine towns exhibits strong growth during the latter part of the eighteenth century slowing down during the first half of the nineteenth. Like the preceding group it is primarily composed of towns in southern Europe, but here Spain rather than Italy predominates (Barcelona, Seville, Valencia, Cadiz, Oporto, and Naples). Hamburg and two of the most prominent centres of French colonial trade, Bordeaux and Nantes, also belong to this group. Many of the expansive ports of the eighteenth century were to experience difficulties in the next century.

On the other hand 15 towns were moving from weak to strong growth. The two largest metropolises, London and Paris, were quite expansive in the first part of the nineteenth century after having passed through a less dynamic phase during the second half of the eighteenth. A number of emerging centres in the north-west (Lille, Liège, Antwerp, Rotterdam, and Cologne) and further to the south (Milan, Turin, Lyon, and Toulouse) are also part of this group. Finally it includes Marseille, the only Mediterranean port capable of secular expansion.

The fourth and largest group in table 2.1 includes 23 towns characterized by growth throughout. Two main components may be distinguished. More than half are British (Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Leeds, Sheffield, Plymouth, Birmingham, Bristol, Bradford, Belfast, and Dublin). The extent to which new industrial centres developed into large cities in Britain has no counterpart elsewhere in Europe before the mid nineteenth century.

The other subgroup among the expansive towns, less studied than the preceding one, is primarily composed of little industrialized central and eastern European centres (Moscow, St Petersburg, Budapest, Bucharest, Warsaw, Prague, Berlin, Munich, and Vienna). The

³ On Italian towns see G. Felloni, 'Italy', in: *Introduction to the Sources of European Economic History 1500–1800*, eds. C. Wilson and G. Parker (London, 1977). Granada and Valencia: J. Harrison, *An Economic History of Modern Spain* (Manchester, 1978), 15. Most of the modern literature in Spanish and Italian economic history in original languages is regrettably missing in Scandinavian research libraries.