

# Economic history in Sweden

## some recent research trends

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In this attempt at an overview of recent writing in economic history in Sweden, it will not be possible to cover all the relevant literature. Rather, some research fields will be discussed where I feel that particularly important contributions have been made during the last few years. In Sweden, Economic History and History are different academic disciplines, representing separate departments at the universities. Though some historians are doing work which may well be labelled economic history, the discussion here will be limited to research carried out within the discipline of economic history proper. Many of the works that will be mentioned are published in Swedish but contain good summaries in English.

### *The labour process, industrialization, and business history*

Research on the history of the labour process has been one of the most expansive fields in Swedish economic history. A large research project, successfully carried out at the Department of Economic History at Uppsala University, has attacked the question how the conditions of the workers was changing during the industrialization from the late nineteenth century onwards. Several volumes have been published, which together give a new picture of the transformations of work during the industrialization.<sup>1</sup>

All these works analyze the labour process in great detail. More importantly, they question established views of what was going on during the industrialization period. Harry Braverman's famous thesis of the degradation of work under capitalism has been one source of theoretical inspiration. His views are, however, critically examined, and in general they are not seen as a reasonable approximation of the changes actually observed. The view of a straightforward process of mechanization, leading to the subdivision of work into ever more specialized tasks and a degradation of work skills, does not gain support.

Rather, several studies point to the existence of substantial barriers against degradation. In mechanical engineering, for instance, diversified production in short series continued to exist. There was certainly a rapid productivity growth, but this often was based on the more efficient use of skilled labour. The continued existence of skilled labour by no means precluded a profitable industrial production.

Studies of the labour process stretch backwards in time as well.<sup>2</sup> The iron industry, Sweden's most important export industry for a long time, is examined from new points of view.<sup>3</sup> The role of female work in the iron industry, a previously neglected chapter, has recently begun to be explored. The below-mentioned research on gender history obviously has influenced the study of industrial history. The industrial history of technology transfer from abroad has provided new insights into the adaptability of the iron industry.<sup>5</sup> The Stockholm factories of the eighteenth century also have been the subject of recent research, presenting many new results on the organization and financing of these forms of enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

Swedish economic historians have previously made important contributions to the international debate on proto-industrialization.<sup>7</sup> The most recent work in this tradition is the dissertation by

Inger Jonsson on the flax cultivators, the women weavers and the merchants in Hälsingland during the early nineteenth century. Here, as in many other regions, proto-industrial activity did not directly lead to the formation of a modern industry.<sup>8</sup>

The history of banking has traditionally been a prominent field in Swedish economic history. This interest is now as least as strong as previously, partly as a consequence of the severe financial crisis of the early 1990s. Much work has been done in recent years on various periods and on comparison between the current crisis and the deflation crisis of the early 1920s as well as the depression of the 1930s. It appears that some common traits in these financial crises can be seen. Before the crises, there had been a plentiful supply of money, credit expansion, and inflation. The financial actors took high risks by lending less carefully. The crisis itself has been characterized by deflation and contraction of credit. Liquidity problems brought many companies into bankruptcy, the banks suffered heavy losses, and the state was forced to intervene in order to rescue and stabilize the financial system.<sup>9</sup> The relations between banks and industry are at the focus of several new studies, and the role of state intervention in financial markets is discussed.<sup>10</sup>

A substantial part of the business history written is traditionally presented in the form of company monographs. Several solid studies have been presented during the 1990s, dealing amongst others with the problematic restructuring of the Swedish iron and steel industry during recent decades.<sup>11</sup> The internationalization of Swedish business is dealt with in several publications.<sup>12</sup>

A one-sided focus on the big and successful enterprises which have survived until today, has some unfortunate consequences. Most enterprises were small, and a great number have been more or less unsuccessful — they have not continued in business for a long time. Their history is largely unwritten. However, there are now systematic attempts at studying the birth and death of enterprise with particular reference to small enterprises. New methods are being developed for the analysis of the characteristics of small and middle-sized enterprises over time.<sup>13</sup> In this context there is a growing interest in Schumpeterian and evolutionary economics.<sup>14</sup>

Institutional economic theory is increasingly brought forward in the analysis of business and financial history.<sup>15</sup> There is clearly a need of a stronger orientation towards theory in order to counteract the spontaneous tendency towards fragmentation which the monographic tradition otherwise easily leads to.

A renewed interest has been seen in the history of communications. One of the problems penetrated is the importance of railway communications in improving accessibility and promoting industrial growth.<sup>16</sup>

### *Historical national accounts and structural change in the Swedish economy*

Important contributions to the analysis of the long-run performance of the Swedish economy are currently being published in several volumes in the series *Historiska nationalräkenskaper för Sverige* (Historical National Accounts for Sweden). Since 1986, seven volumes out of a total of nine have been published.<sup>17</sup>

This impressive work supersedes earlier estimates of the Swedish national product. The estimates, based on detailed component series, are aimed at covering the period from 1800 to 1980. Earlier series have not stretched further back than 1861.

One key result from the new estimates is that Swedish growth seems to have been rather slow during the first half of the nineteenth century. The estimates include unpaid household work throughout the long period studied, which has important consequences. Non-marketed household production amounted to a significant share of total GNP during the nineteenth century. In this sense industrialization meant less of an abrupt change than has previously been assumed. Sweden appears as a society with a high share of services in total production at the beginning of the nineteenth century, approximately 60 per cent. In a long-term perspective the share of services

has been remarkably stable, amounting to just over 50 per cent at the end of the nineteenth century and then slowly rising during the twentieth century.<sup>18</sup>

This work will no doubt stimulate further comparison between the performance of Sweden and that of other economies. Paradoxically, though, the inclusion of unpaid household work in the new series may at least in the short run make comparison with international series more problematic, since most of the latter do not include the production of non-marketed goods and services.

### *Agrarian history*

Agrarian history was one of the most vital fields of Swedish economic history during the 1970s. Many thorough studies were published focussing in particular on the century after 1750, characterized by dynamic change in peasant farming under population pressure.<sup>19</sup> The processes of proletarianization and technological change were studied intensively, usually on a regional basis.<sup>20</sup>

In recent years, there has been a shift in emphasis. Fewer studies now deal with the period immediately preceding the industrial era. The chronological perspective has become broader. Some researchers have gone into the early modern period, analysing the interplay between peasant agriculture and the emerging central state.<sup>21</sup> Others have dealt with the links between agricultural growth, market development, the rural and urban crafts, and the changing division of labour in rural society. The conventional view that Sweden was a very backward country compared to Continental Europe in the early nineteenth century, in terms of agricultural technology or standards of living, has been challenged.<sup>22</sup>

Yet other economic historians have recently focussed on the relation of family farming and the emerging market-orientated agriculture of the late nineteenth and the twentieth century.<sup>23</sup> One of the interesting regions studied is the forest district of Northern Sweden.<sup>24</sup>

This field is relatively new, and much research remains to be done. It appears, however, that many small farms were able to adapt surprisingly well to industrialization, urbanization, and improved communications. Large farms did not take over the small ones. On the contrary, small-scale family farming was able to increase its proportion of the total marketed agricultural production during the intensified process of commercialization stretching from the turn of the century up to World War II. The family farms were able to combine grain and animal production with other sources of income, e.g. from forest work, in a fairly successful way. It is reasonable to expect that the field of agricultural history will be transformed or widened during the next few years as to incorporate the historical analysis of the interplay between economic change and natural resources.<sup>25</sup>

### *Gender history*

One of the most important developments in Swedish economic history since the 1980s has been the emergence of gender history. Some important works were published during the late 1980s, and the expansion has continued during the last few years. In an international perspective, it is probably unusual that such an amount of work has been carried out not only in social history but also within economic history proper. Gender history has probably become the most theoretically orientated field of Swedish economic history in the past few years.

One of the most important dissertations that has come forward so far during the 1990s is Lena Sommestad's study of the Swedish dairy industry during the century after 1850.<sup>26</sup> The key question is why this industry was transformed from a female area of competence to a male one. A process of masculinization was taking place. It cannot be explained in purely economic terms,

since male labour was more expensive than female. The males did not outperform the females in terms of education or practical skills. The dairies were modernized and mechanized, but this made the work less physically demanding and would not by itself have led to a masculinization of the work force. The females certainly were strong enough to do the job. Economically, the dairies would have gained more from the reverse process of replacing dairymen with dairymaids, since the salary of the latter was lower.

Rather, a cultural interpretation seems necessary. In traditional Scandinavian society, dairy work was culturally coded as feminine. Females were expected to be able to perform heavy manual work in the agrarian society. But a new conception of feminine work was emerging during the first decades of the twentieth century. Mechanical and scientifically based production generally was coded in male terms. At the same time, the definition of femininity was changing. Femininity was increasingly seen as characterized by fragility and domesticity. The new view with urban (and of course international) origins was being established particularly during the inter-war period. Influenced by the conception of masculinity as well as that of femininity, dairy work was recoded from female to male.

The fact that there was no obvious economic rationality in the masculinization process raises interesting theoretical questions. The gender division of labour has not been the simple result of economic maximization. The interpretations of masculinity and femininity have not been historical constants. To a considerable extent, these conceptions may be seen as historically changing cultural constructions. The meanings of male or female work have varied, and this has substantially influenced the existing division of labour between men and women. An understanding of how this has happened is essential to our understanding of Swedish society today, where the labour market is fairly strictly divided between the sexes: nearly 90 per cent of the total number of occupations are clearly dominated either by men or by women.

Other studies of the historical formation of gender divisions of labour have also emerged, particularly with reference to industrial labour during the nineteenth century.<sup>27</sup> The role of women capitalists in the industrialization of Sweden is beginning to be explored.<sup>28</sup> A recent dissertation by Lars Svensson explores the gender gap in manufacturing wages during the twentieth century.<sup>29</sup>

Attempts at formulating the broad lines of long-term change in gender relations have recently been made. A former orientation of feminist research towards the economic history of women is now increasingly replaced by theorizing on the relations between the sexes and importance of constructions of gender to societal change. Swedish feminist research in economic history has its own distinctive flavour. The post-structuralist conception of gender constructions as historically unstable, which would deny the possibility of a Grand Story of systematic historical change, does not seem to be shared by most Swedish researchers.

For instance, Anita Göransson has argued that the attempts at delineating a Grand Story of economic gender relations should not be dismissed.<sup>30</sup> In Göransson's vision, two structural changes have been of decisive importance in the long run. One of them has been the transformation of the household economy into a market economy. The other has been the relocation of political power from kin networks to the growing central state. Both changes initially tended to weaken the position of women relative to men, since women were largely excluded from these new bases of power. For a long time women were lacking political rights, and the males had privileged rights of access to practically all core occupations in the economy as well as to all the political resources in society. Yet, the strict division between male and female areas of competence in the household economy did not mean that women were lacking all economic power and influence. Though women formally lacked most of the rights that males possessed, they were often able to exercise a considerable actual influence in the pre-industrial household economy.

As the market economy expanded decisively — and this could roughly be said to have happened during the first half of the nineteenth century in Sweden — the position of women in some ways became more vulnerable. In the towns, women were still excluded from nearly all

trades, including the handicrafts, government services, and occupations requiring a formal education. Women were not supposed to compete with the males in the same trades or occupations. Only some marginal areas were reserved to women. Of course, this severely restricted possibilities of women of gaining their livelihood. Femininity and masculinity were being symbolically separated more than previously. Women were said not to possess the qualities necessary to perform the jobs reserved to males.<sup>31</sup>

But important changes were taking place towards the end of the nineteenth century, when emerging industrial capitalism demanded the labour not only of males but also the cheaper labour of females, for instance in the textile industry. Access to many occupations was now widened, and this also applies to government services such as primary school teaching. The early phase of industrialization was a period of some fluency in gender relations in the labour market. For the first time, males and females could compete for and in the same jobs. However, the position of women as the secondary workforce was fairly soon established. One interesting area of research here is the influence of gender stereotypes in the formation of new gender divisions of labour, in which women were seen as "fit" for certain jobs, usually the most monotonous and worst paid ones, while males were regarded as competent for the jobs involving more skills and formal education. New jobs often were created with such gender stereotypes in mind.<sup>32</sup>

In general, this research on the economic history of gender relations is characterized by the linking of solid empirical studies with theoretical argument. Some elements are taken from historical materialism, but substantially modified by post-structuralist thought. But not all feminist researchers share the same perspectives. A theoretical debate is emerging, in which different orientations meet.

A recent debate, for instance, concerns the relevance of the gender systems theory to empirical research. Yvonne Hirdman, a feminist historian, has developed a theory stressing the existence of a fundamental order of gender relations.<sup>33</sup> According to her, there is a historically remarkable stable pattern of an ordered separation of masculinity and femininity. This is based on two principles. One is the differentiating of the masculine from the feminine: being a man is above all constituted by not being a woman; masculinity and femininity should not be mixed. The other ordering principle is the acceptance of the male as the norm. The norms are related to the male activities.

But the usefulness of the gender systems theory has also been questioned.<sup>34</sup> It has been argued that this theory is formulated at a too generalized level to be really useful as an instrument for empirical analysis. There is also a danger, according to the critics, that human action is left out of the analysis. The logic of the gender system should not be seen as an independent force forming historical change regardless of what human beings actually are doing. Yet another problem discussed is that the gender systems theory seems to presuppose a stable pattern of hierarchy and segregation. This should not be taken as a fact that would not require empirical underpinning. Women can exercise power, and historically there has been a great deal of variation in the position of women in society.

Altogether, this lively research has produced many promising results and may be expected to generate more knowledge about the interplay between economic change, social conflict and the uses of power — including the power over symbols and representations.

### *International studies*

Economic history in Sweden does not only deal with Swedish economic history. The benefits of comparative work is increasingly recognized. Comparative analysis of the industrialization process, for instance, has led to a better understanding of the variety of European outcomes. The Industrial Revolution in Britain is now seen less as a universal experience, less of a standard model according to which other European regional and national examples should be judged.

In the new view, industrialization is not regarded as a 'big spurt', but rather as a continuous process taking place over long time, in different forms and in regionally distinctive patterns. Centralized factory production was but one of the roads, and it should be noted that large-scale industrialization stimulated the emergence of wide varieties of crafts and decentralized small-scale forms of production. The links to agrarian milieus are often stressed in today's research, and growth rates now seem less impressive than in the research carried out some years ago. More weight is now placed on demand and the creation of markets — including cultural aspects — than on technology pure and simple.<sup>35</sup>

Important comparative work has been done on the integration of peasant agriculture into market economies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>36</sup> The economic history of the Baltic countries is now emerging as a field of research in which Swedish scholars are able to make valuable contributions.<sup>37</sup> Research on Third World economic history has, amongst other things, explored the success story of Taiwan and the performance of India and the south-east Asian economies.<sup>38</sup> A not inconsiderable amount of Latin American research has also taken place.<sup>39</sup>

Still, it would be fair to argue that systematic comparative work and international studies remain relatively underdeveloped fields in Swedish research in economic history. Research facilities are expected to improve in 1995, when a new professorship in the economic history of developing countries is to be appointed at Lund University. This will be a most welcome enhancement of the basis for advanced research.

#### Notes

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- <sup>2</sup> One example is Jansson, Jan-Olov, *Arbetsorganisationen vid Motala verkstad 1822-1843: den engelska tiden*. (Work and Workers in the Early Swedish Mechanical Engineering Industry — the Case of Motala verkstad). Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell 1990
- <sup>3</sup> Rydén, Göran, *Hammarlag och hushåll: om relationen mellan smidesarbetet och smedshushållen vid Tore Petrés brukskomplex 1830-1850*. Stockholm: Jernkontoret 1991
- <sup>4</sup> Florén, Anders and Rydén, Göran, *Arbete, hushåll och region. Tankar om industrialiseringsprocesser och den svenska järnhanteringen*. (Work, Household and Region. The Process of Industrialization and the Swedish Iron Industry.) Uppsala Papers in Economic History 29, 1992
- <sup>5</sup> Adamson, Rolf, "Borrowing and Adaptation of British technology by the Swedish Iron Industry in the Early Nineteenth Century", *Technology Transfer and Scandinavian Industrialisation* (Bruland, Kristine, ed). New York and Oxford: Berg 1991, pp 95-133
- <sup>6</sup> Nyberg, Klas, *Köpes: Ull. Säljes: Kläde. Yllemannufakturens företagsformer i 1780-talets Stockholm*. Uppsala: Ekonomisk-historiska institutionen 1992; Persson, Christer,

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<sup>7</sup> Isacson, Maths, and Magnusson, Lars, *Proto-Industrialization in Scandinavia. Craft Skills in the Industrial Revolution*. Leamington Spa: Berg 1987

<sup>8</sup> Jonsson, Inger, *Linodlare, väverskor och köpmän. Linne som handelsvara och försörjningsmöjlighet i det tidiga 1800-talets Hälsingland*. (Flax Cultivators, Women Weavers and Merchants. Linen as a Commodity and a Means of Living in Early 19th Century Hälsingland.) Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis 1994

<sup>9</sup> For an overview see Lindgren, Håkan, "Finanssektorn och dess aktörer 1860-1992", B Furuhausen (ed), *Äventyret Sverige. En ekonomisk och social historia*. Stockholm: Utbildningsradion and Bokförlaget Bra Böcker 1993. Ullenhag, Kersti, *Förnyelse, förvandling, fusion: Uplandsbanken 1965-1985*. Uppsala: Nordbanken 1990. Fritz, Sven, *Louis Fraenckel 1851-1911. Bankman och finansman*. (Louis Fraenckel 1851-1911. Banker and Financier.) Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1994

<sup>10</sup> Ottosson, Jan, *Stabilitet och förändring i personliga nätverk. Gemensamma styrelseledamöter i bank och näringsliv 1903-1939*. (Stability and Change in Personal Networks. Interlocking Directorates in Banks and Industry 1903-1939). Uppsala: Ekonomisk-historiska institutionen 1993. Sjögren, Hans, *Bank och näringsliv. Tvärsnittsanalyser och longitudinella studier av relationer mellan svenska företag och affärsbanker inom det bankorienterade finansiella systemet 1916-1947*. (Bank and Industry. Cross-Section Analysis and Longitudinal Studies of the Relation between Swedish Firms and Commercial Banks within the Bank Orientated Financial System 1916-1947.) Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International 1991. Sjögren, Hans, "Long-term Financial Contracts in the Bank-Orientated Financial System", *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 10 (1994), pp 315-330. Larsson, Mats, and Lindgren, Håkan, "Risktagandets gränser. Utvecklingen av det svenska bankväsendet 1850-1980", in C G Thunman and K Eriksson, *Bankmarknader i förvandling*. Lund: Studentlitteratur 1990. See also several contributions by Swedish economic historians in Lindgren, H, Cottrell, P L, and Teichova, A (eds), *European Industry and Banking 1920-1939. A Review of Bank-Industry Relations*. Leicester: Leicester University Press 1992; Teichova, A, and Gourvish, T (eds), *Universal Banking in the Twentieth Century*. London: Edward Elgar 1994

<sup>11</sup> Two monographs on the steel industry are Jonsson, Sverker, *Vägen mot SSAB. NJA och den svenska handelsstålindustrin 1955-1977*. Luleå: Norrbottens museum 1990; *Företag och samhälle i omvandling. Hellefors Bruk AB och Hellefors Järnverk 1864-1992*. Stockholm: Jernkontoret 1993

<sup>12</sup> E.g., Olsson, Ulf, "Securing the Markets. Swedish Multinationals in a Historical Perspective", G Jones and H Schröter (eds), *The Rise of Multinationals in Continental Europe*. Aldershot: Edward Elgar 1992

<sup>13</sup> Gratzner, Karl, "Vie et mort des entreprises à Stockholm entre 1899 et 1990. Vers une démographie des entreprises", *Naissance et mort des entreprises en Europe, XIX<sup>e</sup>—XX<sup>e</sup> siècles*. Bourgogne: Publication du Centre Georges Chevrier pour l'Historie du Droit 1995, pp 157-178. Gratzner, Karl, "Kleinunternehmertum — Möglichkeiten und Begrenzungen. Ein Beispiel aus der Auf- und Niedergangphase einer Dienstleistungsbranche", *Wissenschaft/Theorie und Praxis. Beiträge zur Wirtschaftsgeschichte* Heft 8/1991,

- <sup>14</sup> E.g., Ottoson, Jan, and Sjögren, Hans, "Banking and Institutional Theory", *The Network of Financial Capital. Essays in Honour of Ragnhild Lundström 20.10 1990*. Uppsala Papers in Economic History 9, 1990. Carlén, Stefan, "An Institutional Analysis of the Swedish Salt Market, 1720-1862", *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 1994, pp 3-28. Magnusson, Lars (ed), *Evolutionary and Neo-Schumpeterian Approaches to Economics*. Boston: Kluwer 1994
- <sup>15</sup> One recent example is Marklund, Göran, *Institutions and Appropriation in Swedish Technology Policy. The Case of STU's Grants to Process Control Technology for Pulp and Paper Production 1968-1991*. Uppsala: Department of Economic History 1994. Marklund examines the role of Swedish governmental technology within a neo-institutional perspective, focussing on patterns of actor relationships within technological systems
- <sup>16</sup> Westlund, Hans, *Kommunikationer, tillgänglighet, omvandling. En studie av samspelet mellan kommunikationsnät och näringsstruktur i Sveriges mellanstora städer 1850-1970*. (Communications, Accessibility, Transformation. A Study of the Interplay between Communications Networks and Industrial Structure in Medium-Sized Swedish Towns 1850-1970.) Umeå: Ekonomisk-historiska institutionen 1992. Mårtensson, Torbjörn, *Bantågens gång. Järnvägens godstrafik och dess anpassning till näringslivets rumslighet, branschstruktur och transportefterfrågan 1890-1985*. (Railway Freight Traffic and its Adaptability to Industrial Localisation, the Structure of Production, and Transport Demand from 1890 to 1985.) Göteborg: Ekonomisk-historiska institutionen 1994. Krantz, Olle, *Swedish Railway Building in the 19th Century in an International Perspective*. Umeå Papers in Economic History No 6, 1992
- <sup>17</sup> The volumes published so far in Historical National Accounts for Sweden include: Schön, Lennart, *Industri och hantverk 1800-1980* (Manufacturing Industry and Handicrafts 1800-1980), Lund 1988; Pettersson, Lars, *Byggnads- och anläggningsverksamhet 1800-1980* (Building and Construction 1800-1980), Lund 1987; Krantz, Olle, *Transporter och kommunikationer 1800-1980* (Transports and Communications 1800-1980), Lund 1986; Krantz, Olle, *Privata tjänster 1800-1980* (Private Services 1800-1980), Lund 1991; Krantz, Olle, *Husligt arbete 1800-1980* (Domestic Work 1800-1980), Lund 1987; Krantz, Olle, *Offentlig verksamhet 1800-1980* (Public Services 1800-1980), Lund 1987; Ljungberg, Jonas, *Deflaterer för industriproduktionen 1888-1955* (Deflators for Industrial Production 1888-1955), Lund 1988. The volumes on agriculture and foreign trade have not yet been published. The estimation of agricultural production is probably the most difficult part in the construction of historical national accounts, due to the unreliability of the agricultural statistics up to World War I.
- <sup>18</sup> For an overview of the national accounts project, see Krantz, Olle, "Swedish Historical National Accounts — the State of the Art", *Nordiska historiska nationalräkenskaper*, ed Olle Krantz. Department of Economic History, Umeå University, Occasional Papers No. 1 (1994). Results are discussed in Krantz, "New Estimates of the Swedish Historical GDP since the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century", *Review of Income and Wealth*, 1988:2; Krantz, "Service Production in Historical National Accounts", *Review of Income and Wealth*, 1994:1. On cyclical change see Schön, Lennart, "Development Blocks and Transformation Pressure in a Macro-Economic Perspective — A Model of Long-Term Cyclical Change", *Skandinaviska Enskilda Banken Quarterly Review* 1991: 3-4
- <sup>19</sup> For an overview of this line of research see Gadd, Carl-Johan, and Jonsson, Ulf, "Agrarian History as a Sub-Field of Swedish Economic History", *Scandinavian Economic History Review* 38 (1990), pp 18-30
- <sup>20</sup> Two of the latest studies published on this period is Herlitz, Urban, *Restadtegen i världsekonomin. Lokala studier av befolkningstillväxt, jordbruksproduktion och fördelning i Västsverige 1800-1860*. (Restadtegen in the World Economy. Local Studies of

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39

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