The blue peasant: indigo as an ethical problem in rural Sweden, 1770-1830

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In 1793, at the Parish meeting (swe. sockenstämma) of Hasslöv and Våxtorp (Halland), was decided, that all male inhabitants should stop wearing all clothes ”which to a part are dyed with blue foreign dye”. Likewise, in the parishes of Harplinge and Steninge (Halland), was decided in 1817, that all honest men, with their sons and farm-hands, should use rough homespun (swe. vadmal), dyed with cheap colors or with no colors at all,

> but never again use the dark blue color, especially since it is well known, that unbelievable sums of money are taken out of the country for the sake of Indigo, although each and everyone knows, that you can buy two dresses made of rough homespun for one dyed with indigo, the cheaper one being just as warm and strong as the dyed one.

Attempts such as these, to regulate, on a local level, the peasantry's[1] use of the color blue in clothes, turn up at the turn of the century. Before 1793, there were, as far as I know, almost no such attempts at all, and the color blue was not discussed, neither at a national level nor in local communities. In this paper – which, must be said, is nothing but a very brief and shallow summary of a more complex article soon to be published in a Swedish anthology[2] – I try to explain why a fight against blue broke out at this specific time. There are three contexts necessary to fully explain the phenomenon. One is the global economic history of indigo blue, another is the conception of a hierarchical societal order in need of visualisation. Here, I deal only with these two aspects, leaving out an important aspect regarding the history of Swedish law and jurisdiction.

Let's start with the easy part: economic history. The development of the so called consumer revolution in Europe is now rather well mapped out. This transformation of the amount and composition of consumption took place between 1650 and 1850. However, the process must clearly be understood in the light of the new global trade system which arose following the European opening of the sea routes, to the Indian Ocean and to the New world. Europe found itself in the middle of a global economy built on colonial plantations and organized company trade. The driving force of this system – and of the consumer revolution – was the growing European demand for new colonial products, such as cotton, suger, porcelain, coffee, tea and dyes.

Here is centered on the king of dyes – indigo. First, a small reminder about preindustrial colors. Almost all colors today are products of fossil fuels and chemical industry. It is easy to forget the materiality of colors: we tend to overlook the fact that there are material substances which dye our clothes, phones, cars, and everything else around us. They must be extracted, treated and transported before they can dye anything. Thus, color is, and has always been, one of the most important global trade goods. One obvious example of this is of course Brazil – named after the Brazil wood, one of the most important dyes in the early modern world. For Sweden, this might be illustrated through Magnus Orrelius commercial dictionary *Köpmans- och Material-Lexikon* (1797), in which color-related objects make up the largest category of goods:156 headwords out of 1 577.

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[1] Due to lack of time (or laziness), I here, unproblematically, translate the Swedish word ”Allmoge” to ”peasantry”, although it not suitable at all.

[2] ”Grå bonde, blå bonde. Den globala indigomarknaden som etiskt problem på svenska landsbygden kring sekelskiftet 1800”, i *Det svenska begäret. Sekler av lyxkonsumtion 1660–1950*, Stockholm: Carlssons, 2014

There are more colors at the local *ICA* here in Sigtuna, than in the whole of the pre-industrial or pre-fossil world. Then, colors were natural resources, pigments from minerals or dyes from plants or animals. Like all natural resources, they were scarce and scattered. Europe is the poorest of all major pre-modern civilizations in regard of color, which may explain the huge importance of dyes in early modern global trade. Of course, added to that is the climatological fact that northern Europe is cold, while the important domestic European dye plants thrive in the Mediterranean sun. Thus, if dyes were important goods globally, they were even more important to Sweden. Sweden was never colorless, but it suffered from a strong lack of clear and durable (resistant to sun and water) colors.

There is durable indigo blue on the tapestry of Ytterhogdal, preserved from 13th-century northern Sweden. It is made out of woad (*Isatis tinctoria*), probably imported from one of the woad regions in southern Europe. There was no other way to produce durable blue in Europe in medieval times – except for an extremely small importation of genuine indigo – made of *Indigofera* – over Venice. This genuine indigo is completely a product of the early modern global trade system – a plantation crop, growing just as well in the New world as around the Indian Ocean. Thus, it does not make its European breakthrough until the end of the 17th century and the organized company trade.

Dictionaries and dying books of 18th-century Sweden show, that the breakthrough for indigo in Sweden happens around midcentury. The word indigo (or its synonyms, such as anil) is not represented in Jesper Swedberg's *Swensk Ordabok* ("Swedish word-book"), written around 1720, or in Haquin Spegel's *Glossarium sveo-gothicum eller Swensk ordabook*, printed 1712. Johan Linder's *Swensk färge-konst* ("Swedish art of dying"), printed in 1720, mentions indigo as a global trade good, but contains no recipe for blue based on indigo (only on blueberries and on a special variety of elderberries). There is, however, a recipe based on indigo in a collection of recipes translated from German and printed in 1722 (*En Försichtig Mattmoders Huus-Färgeri*). Just a few decades later, the word was well established. I was represented, for instance in Olof Lind's *Teutsch-Schwedisches und Schwedisch-Teutsches Lexicon* (1749) and in Samuel Sahlstedt's *Swensk Ord-Bok* (1757). In at least three recipe collections printed in the 1740s, there was a number of recipes based on indigo.

The importation of indigo – to Sweden as well as to Europe as a whole – grew substantially during the 18th century. Especially the plantations in North America thrived. They would soon be put out of business by the British cultivations in India and transformed into cotton plantations, but at this time, they played their role in history, outcompeting and finally killing off the European woad industry. The price of durable indigo blue dropped as substantially, in all of Europe. By the end of the 18th century, at least a few garments or accessories dyed with indigo was affordable by a large amount of the Swedish peasantry, as shown by Hjördis Dahl's study of textiles in peasant estate inventories from Swedish-speaking Finland at the turn of the century.

So far an economic context. However, it does not explain the main issue – why blue was conceived as such a problem. Here, two aspects of blue should be discussed, first a simple one, then perhaps a more complex one.

The local prohibitions of 1793 and 1817 were the consequences of royal edicts. The government was worried about the rising import of goods deemed as unnecessary – luxury products. The edicts, such as the one "considering the necessity of confining the importation and use of foreign luxury goods" (*Angående Nödwändigheten af inskränkning uti införsel och förbrukning af Utländske Yppighets-Waror*) 1817 was clearly rooted in an old tradition of householding built on the consumption of domestic goods, a minimized import and the exporting of any surplus – a guideline both for nations and for individual households. Thus, any taste for foreign goods damaged the nation.

The edicts transferred the responsibility for fighting luxury from the government to the local communities. Hence, the decisions of the Parish meetings: fighting indigo blue was part of local packages of frugality, were other parts were the prohibition or regulation of the consumption of coffee, wine, foreign alcoholic beverages, expensive textiles, and an ostentatious culture of feasting. The only way for the nation to become strong and to maintain its independence in competition with other nations, was to have strong and independent citizens, and they could only become that through diligence and frugality. The abstention from foreign goods then became a necessary political aim.

It is thus possible to see the fight against blue as a late expression of mercantilism. However, that conclusion is as boring as it is oversimplified. Frugility and diligence was not conceived as economic rationality, but as the fruits of virtuous life. Frugality and diligence was at the very heart of civic virtue. For years, I have argued that there was never any mercantilism in Sweden, and that which is routine-like called mercantilism, in reality was a deeply ethical autarchic economic thought, firmly rooted in the Old Testament, in Aristotle, and in the virtuous Roman farmer/writers such as Cato the Elder. Swedish mainstream economic thought of the 18th century, often conceived as a moralist critique of individuals' economic behavior, is really a moral economy, that is a conception of the economy very different from ours: not at all separated from cosmology and ethics, a separate sphere as today, but part of a larger ethical and cosmological system.

Of course, the society lying at the base of this economic thought, at the end of the 18th century, was not that of the Old Testament or the *Polis* of Aristotle. It was the Lutheran estate society. Basically, the estate society can be conceived as a society which fears similarity and equality. The body metaphor, so popular in Swedish political and economic thought during the 17th and 18th centuries, illustrates this well: every bodypart has a given function; that function cannot be fulfilled by any other part of the body. That every part performs its task, and is allowed to perform it by the other parts, is fundamental for the body to function. To us, it is not self-evident that the parts must be arranged hierarchically, but it was then: like in so many other pre-modern societies, the varying performers in society must be different and ordered. Society conceived as an organism was hierarchic and static.

What we call the estate society was, on the one side, a hierarchical society marked by rules and norms of superiority and subordination, but on the other side, it was never static. The rules and the orders were never written in stone, but were renegotiated continuously by different actors. A large part of this ongoing negotiation lies in visualizing. Societal order must be visualized; the hierarchical order must be recognizable by the ordered themselves.

The conception of the necessity of a visualized order led to laws, rules and norms – ideals for order. However, the visualizing itself – the individuals' practices of visualizing position within estate society – meant a continuous challenging of these laws, rules and norms. A large part of visualization of order lies in our clothes and appearances, and a large part of our clothes and appearances lies in its colors. What happens, then, when the supply of color is changed? Everyone knows that the Lutheran estate society was set under heavy pressure by the end of the 18th century – in fact, it was moving towards its doom, but of course, no-one knew that at the time. The processes behind this development are still rather unclear. In my research, I argue that changes in consumer behaviors were an important factor. Through consumption, individuals could challenge, not estate society immediately, but its visualization – without which stable hierarchical order could not exist.

The case of Indigo illustrates this. The peasant population should not wear blue: it should be gray – because people claimed it always had been. None the less, many among the peasantry wore blue,

because they could afford it. This was disturbing the conceived order. For instance, a very typical representative of the ethnographic genre of parish descriptions, flourishing around 1800, the writer Johan Portin deplored the growing taste for luxury in the parish of Torneå in Västerbotten (ca 1820). ”The clothes are very different from the simplicity of old times” – in those days, the peasantry wore rough homespun and a knitted woolen sweater. In Portin’s days, it was a lot worse:

> The mens’ festivity dress now consists of blue Stockholm or homewowen clothe in a jacket or surtout, trousers of the same color, cotton socks, black shoes and boots, silk scarf and felt has – some use pocket watches.

The connection made between blue and pocket watches was common, in parish descriptions as well as in Parish meeting protocolls. In one sentence in the protocoll of 1793 from the parish of Gunnarp, both pocket watches and city blue was prohibited. In Träslöv, in 1817, the most expensive blue color was forbidden, as well as the use of pocket watches among younger males.

Pocket watches were certainly no peasant attribute. The blue color, the watches, and some other goods of fancy, such as walking sticks, was put against ”simplicity in clothing”. The Swedish choice of word was ”tarvlighet”, which at least since the end of the 19th century is a derogative word meaning vulgar meanness. Around 1800, it was a strongly positive word when related to the peasantry, meaning nothing else than ”suitable simplicity”. ”Tarvlighet” was just that: the suitable for peasantry, and blue, like watches and walking sticks, its opposite: not only the vice of vanity, but the very blurring of visualized order: a political action against society. In estate society, the peasantry had a role to play: the role of simplicity. The basis for simplicity was frugality and diligence: hard work and independence from others. The peasantry should eat and wear its own produces, thus dye their clothes with their own dyes. That eliminated the suitability of indigo blue.

It is interesting, that in none of the materials upon which this study is based, there are any reasonings about wealth and economic capacity for consumption. Luxury was always perceived as the *cause* of poverty and vice. It was never described as the *consequence* of any falls of prices of goods or of any growing wealth among parts of the peasantry. The question whether some peasants could afford blue city-colored clothes or pocket watches was completely irrelevant – we are lightyears away from the contemporary Adam Smith. The conception expressed during the age of liberty, that a certain consumption of luxury goods created growth and thus was good for the economy, was, in regard to the peasantry, quite dead. In the Swedish discussion on the usefulness of luxury, it was a good thing when a nobleman or burgher consumed, let’s say 10 *riksdaler* of Swedish products, since it put workers to work, but when a peasant did the same, it was but an expression of vice and a step towards the corruption and downfall of the nation – it did not matter that the indigo blue, although imported was used in Sweden by Swedish dyers on textiles produced in Sweden. The blue peasant shows how economic thought still was embedded in the doctrine of virtue of the Lutheran estate society, in need of a specific visualization.