

The Scandinavian Value Nihilists

The Crisis of Democracy in the 1930s and 1940s

Johan Strang

Summary

In the 1930s and 40s many theories were raised about some kind of connection between relativistic or nihilistic moral theories and the rise of totalitarianism in Europe. In Scandinavia these allegations were directed at the adherents of the value nihilistic theory of Axel Hägerström.

This article explores the ways in which three democratically-minded followers of Hägerström (Ingemar Hedenius, Herbert Tingsten and Alf Ross) struggled to overcome these charges and to reconcile their democratic convictions with Hägerström's value nihilistic theory.

Zusammenfassung

Während der dreißiger und vierziger Jahre des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts wurde vielfach ein Zusammenhang zwischen relativistischen oder nihilistischen moralischen Theorien auf der einen Seite und dem Aufstieg des Totalitarismus in Europa auf der anderen postuliert. In Skandinavien wurden entsprechende Vorwürfe gegenüber den Anhängern der wertenihilistischen Theorie Axel Hägerströms geäußert.

Der vorliegende Artikel untersucht, in welcher Weise drei demokratisch gesinnte Nachfolger Hägerströms – Ingemar Hedenius, Herbert Tingsten und Alf Ross – sich darum bemühten, solcherlei Beschuldigungen entgegenzutreten und ihre demokratische Überzeugung mit der wertenihilistischen Theorie Hägerströms in Einklang zu bringen.

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In 1941, as a critical reaction to the earthshaking events happening on the European continent, the Swedish philosopher Alf Ahlberg stated that “value nihilism is the spiritual background of National Socialism”.¹ Value nihilism was undermining the shared values necessary for both democracy and the peaceful coexistence of human beings. In the same way that the relativism of the ancient Sophists had evolved into a nihilism that eventually wrecked the democracy of Athens, modern relativism was about to ruin the very foundations of the contemporary democracies. “As long as value relativism was an academic affair, it appeared rather harmless. All changed when world history itself pursued its consequences. That is where we are now.”²

Ahlberg’s line of thought was not unique. It was part of a Swedish debate that, in turn, paralleled an international discussion during the 1930s and 40s in which “relativism” was equalled with nihilism and blamed for the rise of totalitarianism and politics of power. The Second World War provoked something of a renaissance for objectivist value theories among the philosophers of the Western world; it has for example been claimed that the famous relativist legal theorist Gustav Radbruch converted from positivism to natural law philosophy as a result of his experiences of Nazism.³ On the other hand, there were also intellectuals who were making the opposite point, that the very idea of democracy implied a relativistic *Weltanschauung* while philosophical and political absolutism were connected. This argument was famously raised by Hans Kelsen in *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie*,⁴ and repeated in various forms by Kelsen himself,

¹ This, and all subsequent translations from the Scandinavian languages, are mine. “... den allmänna värdenihilism, som är den andliga bakgrunden till nationalsocialismen.” Ahlberg, Alf: “Maktfilosofi och värdenihilism”. In: Idem et al. (eds.): *Varför det svenska folket reagerar*. Stockholm 1941, 24.

² “Så länge värderelativismen bara var en akademisk angelägenhet kunde den förefalla tämligen harmlös. Annorlunda blev det, när världshistorien själv drog ut konsekvenserna. Där befinner vi oss nu.” Ibid., 14f.

³ The alleged conversion of Radbruch has repeatedly been discussed by legal historians. A fairly recent contribution is Mertens, Thomas: “Nazism, Legal Positivism and Radbruch’s thesis on Statutory Injustice.” In: *Law and Critique* 14 (2003:3), 277–295.

⁴ Kelsen, Hans: *Vom Wesen und Wert der Demokratie*. Aalen 1981 [1929], 98–104.

as well as by other prominent relativists, such as Bertrand Russell and the logical empiricists, in the years following the Second World War.⁵

The discussion on the nature of the connection between democracy and relativism took different forms in different contexts, but there are reasons that make Scandinavia a particularly interesting case. The political context in Scandinavia in the 1930s differed from both the European continent and the Anglo-Saxon world. Even if liberalism arguably failed to maintain its dominance, fascist movements remained rather insignificant, while Social Democracy emerged as the dominant political force. This did not mean that the Nordic countries were exempt from the culturally nationalistic rhetoric that reigned on the continent. Contrary, in the Nordic countries the national and *völkisch* symbols were not the sole property of the right wing or the Conservatives, but the subjects of rhetorical struggles between different political movements aiming at representing the nation, its people (*folk*) and heritage. The Social Democrats abandoned class-based rhetoric in favour of the politics of *folkhemmet*,⁶ and the Swedish liberals changed their name to *Folkpartiet* in 1934. However, as pointed out by Niels Kayser Nielsen, the Nordic *Sonderweg* was that “democracy” was conceived of as an intrinsic part of this Nordic cultural heritage, which made fascist or anti-democratic propaganda on culturally nationalistic basis very difficult in Scandinavia.⁷ Democracy was “rooted in the very soul of the people”, firmly anchored in the historical figure of the free Nordic peasant.⁸ In Scandinavia therefore, the discussion on the political implications of relativism was taking place in a context in which democracy was considered to be an integral part of the national culture, while totalitarianism was regarded as intrinsically “foreign”.

⁵ Kelsen, Hans: “Absolutism and Relativism in Philosophy”. In: *The American Political Science Review* 42 (1948:5), 906–914; Russell, Bertrand: *Philosophy and Politics*. London 1947; Frank, Philipp: *Relativity – A Richer Truth*. London 1951.

⁶ Götz, Norbert: *Ungleiche Geschwister – die Konstruktion von nationalsozialistischer Volksgemeinschaft und schwedischem Volksheim*. Baden-Baden 2001.

⁷ Kayser Nielsen, Niels: ”Demokrati og kulturel nationalisme i Norden i mellemkrigstiden – en realpolitisk højredrejning”. In: *Historisk tidskrift* 124 (2004:4), 581–603.

⁸ Trägårdh, Lars: ”Sweden and the EU – Welfare state nationalism and the spectre of ‘Europe’”. In: Hansen, Lene and Ole Wæver (eds.): *European integration and national identity – The challenge of the Nordic States*. London 2002, 130–181, here 139. See also: Sørensen, Øystein and Bo Stråth (eds.): *The Cultural Construction of Norden*. Oslo 1997.

Scandinavia can also be seen as exceptional in light of the comparatively loud presence of moral relativism (or non-cognitivism) in the intellectual debate of the 1930s and 40s. The primary target of Ahlberg's charges was not Kelsen, Russell nor the logical empiricists, but the adherents of Axel Hägerström, the founder of the so called Uppsala School in philosophy. Hägerström was famous for his value theory according to which moral judgments are cognitively meaningless; they cannot be true or false as they always involve a feeling. While Hägerström himself, as well as some of his ardent disciples, seemed to believe that his value theory would lead to a more forgiving and humane moral attitude, which would "rise as a Phoenix bird from the ashes",⁹ the critics coined the pejorative label "value nihilism" (*värdenihilism*) and argued that the theory was responsible for the collapse of European culture and even for the rise of totalitarian and antidemocratic ideas.¹⁰ The accusations were particularly numerous after Hägerström's death in 1939 and the posthumous publication of a collection of Hägerström's moral philosophical essays, *Socialfilosofiska uppsatser*. In newspaper articles and reviews entitled "Prof Hägerström och världskrisen" or even "Hitler och Hägerström" it was suggested that the value nihilistic theory had left people in a spiritual void which was now exploited by destructive forces armed with military power.¹¹ The situation called for a response from the democratically-minded followers of Hägerström, and on these pages I will discuss how a group of younger Scandinavian intellectuals confronted the problem of value nihilism and democracy in the 1930s and 40s.¹² The philosopher Ingemar Hedenius (1908–1982), the political

⁹ "... att den, en fågel Fenix, skall födas på nytt ur det gamlas aska med friare och fjärrsyntare blick." Hägerström, Axel: "Om moraliska föreställningars sanning". In: Idem: *Socialfilosofiska uppsatser*. Stockholm 1939 [1911], 35–65, here: 62.

¹⁰ According to the received view, it was the philosopher John Landquist who launched the term 'value nihilism' (*värdenihilism*) in 1931. Cf. Marc-Wogau, Konrad: *Studier till Axel Hägerströms filosofi*. Stockholm 1968, 202.

¹¹ Källström, Harald: "Prof Hägerström och världskrisen". In: *Göteborgs Morgonpost*, 27th January 1940; Lönnqvist, C: "Hitler och Hägerström." In: *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning*, 3rd July 1940.

¹² In this article, I will focus on the problems caused by value nihilistic theory. I will not go into the related, but separate, discussion of the political consequences of Scandinavian Legal Realism. Cf. Bjarup, Jes: "The Philosophy of Scandinavian Legal Realism". In: *Ratio Juris* 18 (2005:1), 1–15; Blandhol, Sverre: *Juridisk ideologi – Alf Ross' kritikk av naturretten*. København 1999; Strang, Johan: "Two Generations of Scandinavian Legal Realists". In: *Retfærd* 32 (2009:1).

scientist Herbert Tingsten (1896–1973), and the philosopher of law Alf Ross (1899–1979), shared a value nihilistic starting point and were recognised as vehement opponents of totalitarianism in the years surrounding the Second World War. While Hedenius established himself as the leading moral philosopher in Sweden, both within the academia as Professor of Practical Philosophy at the University of Uppsala (1947–73) and in the public debate as an active participant in the discussions on religious and moral issues,¹³ Tingsten and Ross have been depicted as the most influential theoreticians of democracy in the Nordic countries of the past century.¹⁴ Tingsten, professor in political science in Stockholm (1935–46) and editor in chief of the leading liberal newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* (1946–60), wrote a number of significant expositions of democracy, most notably *Demokratiens seger och kris* (1933) and *Demokratiens problem* (1945). Ross, professor in jurisprudence in Copenhagen (1938–69), was one of the main participants in the great Danish democracy debate in the years following the German occupation, mainly through his influential *Hvorfor Demokrati?*¹⁵

Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross can undoubtedly be counted among the innovating ideologists or national strategists that contributed to the way in which democracy was conceptualised in Scandinavia in the post-war era.¹⁶ However, even if the discussion of the relationship of value nihilism to totalitarianism and democracy in many ways resembles a textbook in metaethics, I do not believe that the views of Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross can or should be appreciated as attempts at answering some alleged perennial philosophical question about the justification of democracy. Accordingly, it is not the primary aim of this article to assess the validity of their arguments, but to look at how the value nihilists tried to overcome a problem that emerged as a result of the particular historical situation: how these intellectuals struggled to reconcile their value nihilistic philosophical standpoint with their democratic political convictions.

¹³ Nordin, Svante: *Ingemar Hedenius – en filosof och hans tid*. Stockholm 2004.

¹⁴ Nergelius, Joakim: *Konstitutionellt rättighetskydd – svensk rätt i komparativt perspektiv*. Stockholm 1996, 133.

¹⁵ Tingsten, Herbert: *Demokratiens seger och kris*. (= Vår egen tids historia 1880–1930; 1) Stockholm 1933; Idem: *Demokratiens problem*. Stockholm 1945; Ross, Alf: *Hvorfor Demokrati?* København 1946.

¹⁶ I borrow the idea of innovating ideologists from Quentin Skinner and the concept of national strategist from Rune Slagstad. See Skinner, Quentin: *Regarding Method*. Cambridge 2002 (= *Visions of Politics*; 1), 149; Slagstad, Rune: *De nasjonale strateger*. Oslo 1998.

Hedenius – Science and Politics

Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross were by no means uncritical disciples of Hägerström. Rather, there are good reasons to argue that they formed, or belonged to, a group of intellectuals who were abandoning Hägerström in favour of recent developments in international analytic philosophy. But Hägerström, Uppsala philosophy and, in particular, value nihilism, had gained a recognised position in the Swedish intellectual debate, epitomising a modern, progressive and scientific way of thinking,¹⁷ and thus it formed an intellectual legacy that Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross were keen on making their own. When Hägerström died in 1939 Hedenius quickly emerged as the main proponent of the value nihilistic theory in Sweden. He defended the theory against criticisms raised by Ernst Cassirer, arguing that Cassirer had misleadingly equated value nihilism with the *homomensura* thesis of the Ancient Sophists.¹⁸ Hedenius also wrote a series of semi-popular articles on Hägerström and the value nihilistic theory in the Social Democratic journal *Tiden* in 1940–42, some of which were gathered as the book *Om rätt och moral* (1941). Svante Nordin has correctly emphasised that the value theory Hedenius was defending was technically and rhetorically more similar to the emotive or non-cognitive theories of Alfred Ayer (1936), Rudolf Carnap (1935) and Bertrand Russell (1935) than to Hägerström.¹⁹ However, by explicitly ascribing the theory to Hägerström and by adopting the pejorative

¹⁷ Källström, Staffan: *Värdenihilism och vetenskap – Uppsala filosofin i forskning och samhälle under 1920- och 30-talen*. Göteborg 1984; Idem: *Den gode nihilisten – Axel Hägerström och striderna kring uppsala filosofin*. Stockholm 1986.

¹⁸ Cassirer, Ernst: *Axel Hägerström – eine Studie zur schwedischen Philosophie der Gegenwart*. Göteborg 1939; Hedenius, Ingemar: „Über den alogischen Character der sog. Werturteile. Bemerkungen zu Ernst Cassirer: Axel Hägerström. Eine Studie zur schwedischen Philosophie der Gegenwart“. In: *Theoria* 5 (1939:3), 314–329.

¹⁹ The value nihilistic theory of Hägerström is often regarded as the first expression of the non-cognitivist or emotivist theories later associated primarily with the logical empiricists (e.g. Ayer, Alfred: *Language, Truth and Logic*. London 1958 [1936]; Carnap, Rudolf: *Philosophy and Logical Syntax*. London 1935; Russell, Bertrand: *Religion and Science*. London 1935). However, while the logical empiricists based their theory on the principle of verification and logical analysis, Hägerström's version was rooted in the act-psychological terminology of Austrian Werttheorie (Franz Brentano and Christian von Ehrenfels). Cf. Petersson, Bo: *Axel Hägerströms värde teori*. Uppsala 1973; Nordin, Svante: *Från Hägerström till Hedenius – den moderna svenska filosofin*. Lund 1983, 149–152.

label “value nihilism” launched by Hägersröm’s critics, Hedenius palpably pursued the vacant position as the leading proponent of the value nihilistic theory in Sweden.²⁰

Already Hedenius’ first article “Om Hägerströms filosofi” in *Tiden* 1940 provoked a worried response. Anders Örne, a Social Democratic Member of Parliament and the general director of the Post Office Administration claimed that the philosophy of the Uppsala School formed “a theoretical foundation for the advance of the modern totalitarian states” and that the consistent value nihilist must hold that “the Finns, who are presently fighting for their political freedom and self-government [...], are putting their lives at stake for sheer superstition”²¹. Hedenius replied by claiming that even if it, of course, is conceivable that a philosophical theory causes someone believe one thing or the other, it would be crazy to suggest that Hägerström had caused the political developments in Italy, Germany and Russia. Rather, by claiming that Uppsala philosophy formed a theoretical foundation for the totalitarian states, Örne seemed to be indicating a logical connection of some sort. But, Hedenius argued, it is a grave misunderstanding to believe that the value nihilistic theory can form a theoretical foundation for a destructive morality, because the basic idea of value nihilism is that a scientific theory cannot form the foundation for any morality at all.²²

In *Om rätt och moral*, Hedenius used a similar strategy in refuting the allegations that value nihilism implied a practical nihilism. Hedenius argued that the basic tenet of a practical nihilism, “everything is allowed”, is a normative statement, i.e. a valuation, and as such theoretically meaningless according to the value nihilistic theory itself.²³ Hedenius also confronted Alf Ahlberg’s claim that value nihilism was paving way for anarchy and despotism by undermining the shared values on which civilisation and democracy were based. While Ahlberg was perfectly correct in claiming that shared

²⁰ Strang, Johan: ”Arvet efter Kaila och Hägerström – den analytiska filosofin i Finland och Sverige”. In: Nygård, Stefan and Johan Strang (red.): *Mellan idealism och analytisk filosofi – den moderna filosofin i Finland och Sverige*. Helsingfors/Stockholm 2006.

²¹ “... en teoretisk grundval för de moderna diktaturstaternas framfart” and “... att finnarna, som för närvarande kämpa för sin politiska frihet och sin statsliga självbestämmanderätt [...], blott kämpa för idel vidskepelse.” Örne, Anders: “Uppsalafilosofin – reflexioner av en lekman”. In: *Tiden* 32 (1940:3), 167–173, here 167 and 171.

²² Hedenius, Ingemar: “Hägerström och diktaturstaternas framfart”. In: *Tiden* 32 (1940:3), 174–178, here 177.

²³ Idem: *Om rätt och moral*. Stockholm 1967 [1941], 145–146.

values are a prerequisite for a peaceful coexistence of human beings, Hedenius thought he was mistaken in believing that these values have to be thought of as absolute, true or objective.²⁴ There is hardly any proof, Hedenius claimed, that people who live in peaceful co-existence with each other nurse ideas that are in any way contradictory to value nihilism; in fact, Hedenius continued, most people have not thought about these things in a theoretical and philosophical manner. Neither did Hedenius think that there was any convincing empirical evidence suggesting that the value nihilistic theory had degenerative effects on the actual moral attitudes of people. “Being personally acquainted with a rather significant share of those concerned” Hedenius dared to witness that many value nihilists were, in fact, very moral people.²⁵

Hedenius’ basic strategy in refuting the allegations of a connection between value nihilism and totalitarianism was to emphasise the rift between scientific theory and political ideology. In Nordin’s words, Hedenius transformed value nihilism from a culturally revolutionary programme to an academic affair, with little or no consequences for cultural or political life in general.²⁶ Value nihilism is a philosophical theory, Hedenius argued, and as such, it does not necessarily bear any relationship to any particular political attitude; in fact, properly understood, value nihilism itself denies the possibility of such a connection. However, as a consequence of this rigorous demarcation between science and politics, Hedenius was also forced to distance himself from the optimistic belief in the emancipatory effects of value nihilism, suggested by Hägerström and his more ardent disciples. Even if Hedenius succeeded in overcoming the explicit connections between value nihilism and totalitarianism, his manoeuvre seemed to have a downside that committed him to silence. What could a value nihilist possibly say in defence of democracy?

Hedenius did not directly touch upon the problem of democracy in the articles in *Tiden* or in the book *Om rätt och moral*, but this was something he was given the chance to do in the anthology *Nordisk demokrati*, edited by the Danes Hal Koch and Alf Ross in 1949. The explicit task of Hedenius’ essay “Filosofiska skäl för demokratien” was to

²⁴ Ibid., 147–148.

²⁵ “Efter egen bekantskap med en ganska stor del av de personer det gäller, kan jag våga påståendet, att det icke finns skäl för antagandet, att någon av dem skulle ha varit mer moralisk, om han omfattat t. ex. en värdeobjektivistisk teori.” Ibid., 146.

²⁶ Nordin 1983, as footnote 19, 151.

consider the prospects for a value nihilistically sound defence of democracy. Hedenius started his exposition by pointing at the apparent conflict between his philosophical conviction and the common idea that philosophy should be able to provide fundamental arguments for democracy. From the logical-analytical and empirical perspective of modern scientific philosophy, Hedenius argued, it was impossible to give objective reasons for any political system. Therefore, Hedenius continued, it was rather obvious that the traditional arguments for democracy, as presented by Rousseau and Bentham, were confusing and invalid. Not only did they fail to prove that democracy promotes “freedom” and “common good”, they actually believed that “freedom” and “common good” were objective or absolute values. In other words, they did not realise that “no facts about reality can give logical reasons for anything being valuable”.²⁷ From a value nihilistic point of view, Hedenius argued, the only way one can give philosophical reasons for democracy is by pointing at certain actual features of democracy which one *presupposes* that the persons that the argument is directed to actually like. For instance, a scholar might be able to prove that democracy leads to greater “freedom” and “equality” for the population, but this does not persuade someone who does not like freedom and equality. The truth or validity of the basic values can not be proven.²⁸

It might seem like a strange idea that only people who previously support certain values can be reached by the arguments in favour of democracy. However, as Ola Sigurdson has observed, this idea of shared values actually formed a corner stone of Hedenius’ moral philosophy.²⁹ It was not an idea that was original to Hedenius or to the Scandinavian value nihilists, rather, on this particular point Hedenius followed a line of thought central to many of the famous advocates of emotivism or non-cognitivism. For example, in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936) Alfred Ayer explicitly declared that “argument on moral questions is possible only if some system of values is presupposed”.³⁰ If we do not share the same values, the discussion collapses into a meaning-

²⁷ “... inga fakta om verkligheten kan ge *logiskt* tvingande bevis för att något är i och för sig värdefullt”. Hedenius, Ingemar: “Filosofiska skäl för demokratien.” In: Koch, Hal and Alf Ross (red.): *Nordisk Demokrati*. København 1949, 210.

²⁸ Ibid., 211.

²⁹ Sigurdson, Ola: *Den lyckliga filosofin – etik och politik hos Hägerström, Tingsten, makarna Myrdal och Hedenius*. Stockholm 2000, 177–179 and 242–243.

³⁰ Ayer 1936, as footnote 19, 111.

less confrontation of irreconcilable world-views. We might feel that our opponent has an underdeveloped moral sense, but we do not have any arguments to prove him wrong.

In “Filosofiska skäl för demokratin” Hedenius extended the thought further by arguing that all our beliefs are based upon basic principles which have been chosen without evidence. It is not a feature that is special for moral and ethical beliefs, it holds true also for theoretical assumptions about reality. Some principles have to be the first ones; there is no way of escaping the choice.³¹ This axiomatic way of thinking was common among scientists and philosophers in the early 20th century, but seldom explicitly discussed in relation to ethics.³² Still, it does seem to have been an underlying assumption of many value nihilists that a meaningful moral discussion required shared moral axioms. However, the pressing problem for such a conception of ethics is to give an account of, or to discuss the content or nature of these basic values. On this particular point, the value nihilists seemed to lean towards a voluntaristic and almost existentialistic conception according to which the choice of one’s basic moral principles is a very personal affair. In this sense, the value nihilistic claim that moral issues are non-cognitive was not intended as an argument for the superiority of science, but rather as an argument against unwarranted uses of science and reason on an area in which it did not belong. It was an attempt to defend personal autonomy on moral issues.³³

On the other hand, the actual choices of people, i.e. the actual valuations of individuals or groups of people, were, of course, empirical matters of fact which could be established by means of an empirical statistical or sociological analysis, and in this sense,

³¹ Hedenius 1949, as footnote 27, 211f.

³² Hans Reichenbach is an exception in talking explicitly about the necessity of “moral axioms” in ethics. Every ethical argument, he argues, must contain one ethical premise which is not derived by the same argument, and every ethical system must contain some ethical axioms which are not derivable from the system. These basic ethical axioms, Reichenbach continues in emotivist/value nihilist fashion, are not statements (they cannot be true or false), but directives or imperatives used in order to influence the behaviour of other people. Reichenbach, Hans: *The Rise of Scientific Philosophy*. Berkeley 1951, 279–283.

³³ On such an interpretation of Carnap’s emotivism, cf. Uebel, Thomas: “Political philosophy of science in logical empiricism: the left Vienna Circle”. In: *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 36 (2005:4), 762–764.

the value nihilists undoubtedly represented a “scientific” view on ethics. Mostly however, the valuations were taken as more or less self-evident. Hedenius merely stated that the evaluative background for democracy was part of a greater net or system of attitudes that characterises our culture and our attitude towards life;³⁴ that this community of shared values (*värdegemenskap*) is the result of the experiences and struggles of previous generations and that these values have become indisputable for large parts of humanity.³⁵ The moral values presupposed by the philosopher in his arguments for democracy, Hedenius argued, are not accidental, but form a “cornerstone of our culture”.³⁶ Even if Hedenius did not give a more precise definition of this “culture”, he apparently had no doubts that the audience of the book *Nordisk Demokrati* belonged to the same culture and shared the same basic values. He concluded his article “Filosofiska skäl för demokratin” by asking whether the reasons he had presented in favour of democracy were so convincing that it would be impossible to live a satisfactory life without democracy. His conclusion was that this undoubtedly was the case, “[f]or us”, thereby ultimately appealing to a shared set of Nordic values in his account of the philosophical reasons for democracy.³⁷

Tingsten – Unscientific Ideologies

Tingsten did not share his friend Hedenius’ immediate connection with the philosophy of Hägerström. In his autobiography, Tingsten says that he read only the more popular writings of Hägerström, and that his acquaintance with Hägerströmian philosophy was largely second hand.³⁸ Thus, there is good evidence supporting Johan Lundborg’s claim that the Hägerströmian influence on Tingsten was of a rather general character.³⁹ However, following Bernt Skovdal, it could be feasible to take the second hand nature of the Hägerströmian influences seriously, and classify Tingsten as an “associated

³⁴ Hedenius 1949, as footnote 27, 213.

³⁵ Hedenius 1941, as footnote 23, 142.

³⁶ “... en kärnpunkt i vår kultur”. Hedenius 1949, as footnote 27, 213.

³⁷ “Onekligen är det så: för oss”. Ibid., 224.

³⁸ Tingsten, Herbert: *Mitt liv – Ungdomsåren*. Stockholm 1961, 145.

³⁹ Lundborg, Johan: *Ideologiernas och religionens död – en analys av Herbert Tingstens ideologi- och religionskritik*. Nora 1991, 24 and 27.

member” of the critical group of younger Uppsala philosophers who were replacing the ideas of Hägerström with international trends in analytic philosophy.⁴⁰ From this perspective, Skovdal assumes that Tingsten was quite familiar with the recent discussions of the value nihilistic theory, and even presents a rather convincing case that Tingsten adhered to a version of value nihilism that resembled Hedenius’ semantic or linguistic version more than Hägerström’s psychological.⁴¹

This is probably correct as far as it is justified to say that Tingsten actually advocated a particular philosophically elaborated value theory. Mostly, however, it seemed that the value nihilistic ideas and slogans formed something of a self-evident starting point in Tingsten’s scholarship.⁴² This attitude was apparent not least in Tingsten’s outspoken scepticism regarding the possibilities of justifying democracy. In both of his major works on democracy, i.e. *Demokratiens seger och kris* and *Demokratiens problem*, Tingsten disproved of the traditional justifications of democracy as he thought they were ultimately based either on the metaphysics of natural law philosophy, or on concealed personal political valuations.⁴³ But neither did Tingsten find Kelsen’s attempt to construe a defence of democracy on the basis of a relativistic philosophy any more convincing. According to Tingsten, Kelsen’s argument was based on an unwarranted psychological idea that a person who is convinced of the absolute truth of his or her standpoint is more likely to resort to undemocratic means of realising his or her conviction than someone of a more relativistic frame of mind. More precisely, Tingsten continued, Kelsen failed to clarify the decisive difference between an absolutist and a relativist attitude. In his view it had to be something more significant than the claim that an absolutist view is more vigorously supported than a relativist view, as this would merely support the preposterous claim that a democratic order rests on the weak political passion of its population.⁴⁴ Finally, Tingsten claimed, there is hardly anything inherent in relativism that excludes an undemocratic attitude; in contrast, there were also many fascists that used “relativism” as an argument in favour of their political

⁴⁰ “... associerad medlem”. Skovdal, Bernt: *Tingsten, totalitarismen och ideologierna*. Stockholm/Stehag 1992, 134.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 106–122.

⁴² Källström 1984, as footnote 17, 147.

⁴³ Tingsten 1933, as footnote 15, 21–32; Tingsten 1945, as footnote 15, 59–90.

⁴⁴ Tingsten 1933, as footnote 15, 26–28; Tingsten 1945, as footnote 15, 85–87.

stance. In summary, Tingsten complained that Kelsen, well-known for his great achievements in exposing political valuations underpinning other political theories, relapsed into making the same mistake himself, when trying to rationalise a pacifistic, anti-revolutionary, liberal or reform-socialistic attitude.⁴⁵

This was something that Tingsten wanted to avoid himself, and like many value nihilists, he believed that moral and political questions ultimately were down to personal convictions and voluntaristic decisions that could not be justified or even discussed within the realm of science. Skovdal has observed that one of the few times that Tingsten tried to make a moral appeal for democracy, in a speech to students in Uppsala 1948, he did it by stressing that “we must consciously act in accordance with our valuations” and by emphasising that “[w]e are alone, and the responsibility is ours”. He even referred to Sartre at this point.⁴⁶ But even if Tingsten believed it was evident that “the ‘proofs’ for the value of democracy, in the dogmatic form they have traditionally been presented, are invalid”, he still thought that that they contained “a core of truth”.⁴⁷ For example, Tingsten argued, the claim of the natural and absolute equality of men can be understood as a critical statement pointing to the fact that there are no rational reasons for the privileges of the nobility. In fact, Tingsten continued, historically most of the advances of democracy have been made as a result of revealing untenable features in the existing order. Suffrage was gradually extended when it was considered irrational or insensible to deny a certain group of people, e.g. women or the poor, the right to participate in elections. On the whole, Tingsten argued, “[t]he democratic line in the debate has appeared less as an ideology than as a critique of ideologies and traditions”.⁴⁸ In this way, for Tingsten the rational and scientific criticism of ideologies formed a central part of the democratic attitude.

⁴⁵ Tingsten 1933, as footnote 15, 28f.

⁴⁶ “Vi måste medvetet handla utifrån våra värderingar [...] Vi är ensamma, och ansvaret är vårt.” Tingsten, Herbert: *Argument*. Stockholm 1948, 303; Skovdal 1992, as footnote 40, 404. Hedenius also noticed that the democratic conviction of his friend Tingsten was of a kind of existentialistic nature, and that Tingsten was convinced that any attempt at justifying democracy was futile. Hedenius, Ingemar: *Herbert Tingsten – Människan och demokraten*. Stockholm 1973, 103–105.

⁴⁷ “... en kärna av sanning”. Tingsten 1945, as footnote 15, 90.

⁴⁸ “Den demokratiska linjen har i debatten mindre framstått som en ideologi än som en kritik av ideologier och traditioner.” *Ibid.*, 97.

However, from the point of view of value nihilism such criticism seems to involve a similar problem that a justification of democracy does: if it is impossible to scientifically justify a democratic standpoint, it must be equally impossible to criticise a totalitarian ideology. This challenge was the starting point for Tingsten's most elaborated discussion of his ideology-critical programme, i.e. the essay "De politiska ideologierna i vetenskaplig debatt". "It is often asserted", Tingsten argued, "that ideologies are valuations, and that they therefore cannot be criticised; the question of truth and falsity does not exist when it comes to valuations."⁴⁹ However, analysing ideologies, Tingsten continued, one will find that they are not essentially valuations, but rather statements about facts.⁵⁰ Thus, value nihilism does not render ideologies immune to scientific analysis and criticism, as long as it is the theoretical and empirical assumptions and the logical coherence of the ideology that are discussed.⁵¹ Some ideologies, Tingsten argued, can be criticised on behalf of a more or less explicit metaphysical assumption of the existence of a supreme being or a natural law; some, typically originating in the philosophies of Hegel and Marx, for their teleological conceptions of history; and some for their assumptions on biological differences between nationalities, races or social classes.⁵²

Tingsten did not only use his ideology-critical method on the totalitarian ideologies, he also used it as part of his critical analyses of less authoritarian political ideologies, such as Conservatism and Social Democracy.⁵³ Tingsten embraced the idea that the democratic line in the debate was rational criticism, and soon "ideologies" became

⁴⁹ "Ofta påstås att de politiska ideologierna utgöra värderingar och på denna grund äro undandragna debatt; när det gäller värderingar föreligger ju inte sanningsfrågan." Tingsten, Herbert: *Idékritik*. Stockholm 1941, 12.

⁵⁰ "Men en undersökning av några politiskt viktiga ideologier visar omedelbart att de icke huvudsakligen utgöra serier av värderingar. Verklighetsomdömen spela huvudrollen." *Ibid.*, 12.

⁵¹ For a typology of Tingsten's different ways of refuting ideologies, see Lundborg 1991, as footnote 39, 57–86.

⁵² Tingsten 1941, as footnote 49, 13–15.

⁵³ Tingsten, Herbert: *De konservativa idéerna*. Stockholm 1939; Idem: *Den svenska socialdemokratiens idéutveckling*. Stockholm 1967 [1941]. See also Lundborg 1991, as footnote 39, 52–55, and Skovdal 1992, as footnote 40, 69–74.

something that had to die if democracy was to prevail.⁵⁴ In *Den svenska socialdemokratiens idéutveckling* he argued that the Swedish Social Democrats had gradually overcome the untenable Marxist ideology in favour of a liberal welfare ideology.⁵⁵ At the time still a member of the Social Democratic Party himself, Tingsten's historical interpretation was undoubtedly intended as a political move in favour of the development he described, and accordingly, it spurred negative reactions from more Marxist members of the party.⁵⁶

Tingsten's way of enabling rational or scientific criticism of ideologies on the grounds that they are essentially characterised, not by their valuations, but by their statements of facts, has been subject to much discussion both by Tingsten's contemporaries and by historians.⁵⁷ But it has not been noticed that Tingsten's move, in fact, corresponded to the standard way in which value nihilists accounted for moral reasoning and disagreement. A basic objection to a non-cognitive or subjectivist/relativist moral theory, raised already by G. E. Moore, was that it failed to explain the fact that we do in fact engage in meaningful discussions on moral issues, and occasionally even change our views as a result of these debates. If moral judgements are to be understood as mere expressions of feelings, this is impossible as there is nothing in the debate that can be acknowledged as true or false.⁵⁸ The standard reply of the value nihilist is to argue that these discussions do not concern the valuations, but rather the interpretations of facts. For example, two persons debating abortion surely agree on the valuation that "killing human beings is evil", the issue at stake is rather the definition of "living human being". In his *Language, Truth, and Logic* Ayer famously challenged his readers to give

⁵⁴ Johansson, Alf W.: *Herbert Tingsten och det kalla kriget*. Stockholm 1995, 27–31; Skovdal 1992, as footnote 40, 13.

⁵⁵ Tingsten 1967, as footnote 53, 353–366.

⁵⁶ Cf. Linderborg, Åsa: *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia – historieskrivning som ideologisk maktresurs 1892–2000*. Stockholm 2001, 204–217; Johansson 1995, as footnote 54 246–250.

⁵⁷ For an analysis of the debate between Tingsten and the political scientist (later to become the leader of the Swedish Conservatives) Gunnar Heckscher on the possibility of scientifically criticising ideologies, see Lundborg 1991, as footnote 39, 52–56; Skovdal 1992, as footnote 40, 69–74.

⁵⁸ Moore, George Edward: "The Nature of Moral Philosophy". In: Idem: *Philosophical Studies*. London 1922, 310–339.

an example of a moral argument that could not, in this way, be reduced to a logical or empirical question; carefully analysed, he claimed, every moral discussion would turn out to be a discussion of facts rather than values.⁵⁹ Thus there was a tension in the value nihilist doctrine, between the call for an autonomous morality, liberated from the strains of traditional dogmatic systems of morality, and a form of scientism that claimed that the questions that remained “truly” autonomously moral in character were rather limited. This tension was undoubtedly also characteristic of Tingsten and his criticism of ideologies.

After the war, in *Demokratiens problem*, Tingsten launched his famous idea of democracy as a “supra-ideology” (*överideologi*). “You are a democrat and at the same time a conservative, liberal or socialist”, Tingsten argued, and therefore the basic paradox of democracy is that one might have to accept and defend a government that endorses political ideas that contradicts one’s own.⁶⁰ In this connection Tingsten nursed an idea of the necessity of shared values that was rather similar to Hedenius’. But while Hedenius reached his conclusion as a result of a particular line of philosophical reasoning according to which any moral justification requires shared moral axioms, Tingsten connected the necessity of shared values more directly to his conception of democracy, tracing the origin of the idea to Rousseau’s conception of the majority rule as the best approximation of the general will.⁶¹ The democratic “supra-ideology”, Tingsten argued, required that the population would be prepared to conform itself to the decisions of the majority, and therefore it presupposed that the population belonged to the same community of shared values (*värdegemenskap*).

The idea of shared values as prerequisite for democracy was not something Tingsten came up with after the war, when democracy had emerged victorious and become the preferred (supra-)ideology of all. Already in 1933 he had argued that a set of shared values was just as important for democratic practice as a common language was for communication. If people are not prepared to accept political decisions and compromises, democracy does not stand a chance.⁶² And in a political dictionary from 1937,

⁵⁹ Ayer 1936, as footnote 19, 110–112.

⁶⁰ “Man är demokrat, men därjämte konservativ, liberal eller socialist.” Tingsten 1945, as footnote 15, 57.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

⁶² Tingsten 1933, as footnote 15, 61.

Tingsten declared that “democracy ultimately rests on a certain community of shared values”.⁶³ Moreover, he also explicitly linked the rise of totalitarianism with the annihilation of this community of shared values. In his inaugural lecture in 1935 Tingsten claimed that the radicalisation of political life and the rise of totalitarian parties were challenging the shared values on which the democratic system rests.⁶⁴ Similarly a few years later, Tingsten argued that the crisis of democracy on the European continent was a result of rising economical and social conflicts, which had “disturbed the community of shared values that democracy is ultimately based upon”.⁶⁵ Instead of voting in parliamentary elections, the conflicting parties had resorted to revolution and open battle.

This idea of shared values was undoubtedly very central to Tingsten’s conception of democracy. However, as Bengt-Ove Boström, among others, has observed, he was somewhat ambivalent in his description of the nature of this relationship.⁶⁶ When talking about the “supra-ideology” thesis, Tingsten seemed to have been arguing that the values that have to be shared are simply the ones cherishing the formal democratic procedure itself. If democratic and socialist values come in conflict a true democrat would always choose democracy. In this sense the idea of shared values amounts to little more than the claim that democracy requires that the population share a positive valuation of democracy. On the other hand, there were also occasions in which Tingsten indicated that democracy required that people shared values of a more substantial kind; that they agreed, at least to some extent, on the content of the political decisions as well. This perspective, in turn, was particularly dominant when Tingsten discussed the reasons for the success of democracy in Sweden and the Nordic countries. In the article “Nordisk Demokrati” Tingsten claimed that the Nordic political debate, in contrast to the continental, was characterised by a dismissal of extreme political standpoints; everyone agreed on the main issues and the political parties were piling up in

⁶³ “Demokratien vilar ytterst på en viss värdegemenskap.” Dahlberg, Gunnar and Herbert Tingsten (red.): *Svensk politisk uppslagsbok*. Stockholm 1937, 104. It is very plausible that it was Tingsten, more than Dahlberg, who was responsible for these paragraphs.

⁶⁴ Tingsten, Herbert: “Statskunskapen och den politiska utvecklingen”. In: Myrdal, Gunnar and Herbert Tingsten: *Samhällskrisen och socialvetenskaperna*. Stockholm 1935, 59.

⁶⁵ “Den värdegemenskap, på vilken demokratien ytterst vilar, har rubbats.” Tingsten, Herbert: ”Nordisk demokrati”. In: *Nordens kalender* (1938), 41–50, here 48–50.

⁶⁶ Boström, Bengt-Ove: *Samtal om demokratin*. Lund 1988, 152–153.

the middle.⁶⁷ Two years later Tingsten included strong national unity, lack of minorities, as well as a long tradition of representative government, civic liberties and an effective and respected administration, among the main reasons for the success of democracy in the Nordic countries.⁶⁸

Ross – What is Democracy?

The Danish Legal philosopher Alf Ross came to Uppsala to study with Hägerström in 1928 after he had failed to get his Kelsen-inspired doctoral thesis accepted at the University of Copenhagen. Hägerström's moral and legal philosophy were hugely influential on Ross and the value nihilistic theory remained a central trait in his scholarship throughout his career, although in the 1940s he, like Hedenius, supplemented or even replaced the Hägerströmian arguments with ideas and techniques mainly from logical empiricism.⁶⁹

In 1946 Ross published what he called “his modest contribution to Denmark's fight for freedom and independence”, *Hvorfor Demokrati?*. The title of the book was, however, somewhat misleading as Ross had in the preface declared that he would not in the name of any imagined authority of science try to convince the reader that a particular attitude was correct.⁷⁰ In a manner that resembled Hedenius, Ross argued that if someone did not like democracy, freedom or peace, there was no logical way to prove that he is wrong. But Ross emphasised that this did not lead to a resignation in the face of totalitarianism: A person that refuted the idea that values could be scientifically proven

⁶⁷ Tingsten 1938, as footnote 65, 48–50. Later, Tingsten explicitly connected the idea of shared values to social, cultural or historical factors, referring to the “almost remarkable national, linguistic and religious homogeneity” (“en nästan enastående homogenitet i fråga om nationalitet, språk och religion”) as the main explanation for the success of democracy in the Scandinavian countries. Tingsten, Herbert: *Från idéer till idyll – den lyckliga demokrati*. Stockholm 1966, 12.

⁶⁸ Tingsten, Herbert: ”Folkstyret i Norden”. In: Petander, Karl (red.): *Nordisk Gemenskap*. Stockholm 1940, 50–83, here 83.

⁶⁹ Blandhol 1999, as footnote 12, 29–45; Dalberg-Larsen, Jørgen: *Dansk Retsfilosofi – udviklingslinjer og portrætter*, København 2003, 46–67.

⁷⁰ “...mit beskedne Bidrag til Danmarks Frihedskamp”. Ross 1946, as footnote 15, 7. Unless otherwise stated, I am referring to the English translation: Ross, Alf: *Why Democracy?*. Cambridge/Massachusetts 1952.

did not have to fall back into indifference. “Because a point of view is a point of view and not a scientific truth, it naturally does not follow from this that one cannot have some point of view”, Ross claimed and continued with a personal declaration: “I know very well what I shall stand for and fight for. Only I do not imagine myself, or try to make others believe, that it can be scientifically proved that my point of view is the ‘right’ one.”⁷¹ In this way, Ross tried to turn value nihilism into a defence of personal autonomy and the choice between democracy and totalitarianism into a very personal affair, something that each individual ultimately had to make up his or her own mind about and carry the responsibility for. But Ross also seemed to think that it was possible to appeal to these valuations as matters of fact. In order to be effective, Ross argued, the defence of democracy must “start from the available historical valuations that have actually been held by large groups of people”.⁷² Like Hedenius, Ross believed that shared values are a prerequisite for a successful, and indeed meaningful, moral argument.

But Ross’ main strategy in defending democracy was not to appeal to the personal responsibility of the citizens or to a set of shared values, but rather to clarify what actually was at stake in the choice between democracy and totalitarianism. Ross seemed to think that many opponents of democracy did not really understand the difference between totalitarianism and democracy, and that they would change their minds if the erroneous conceptions were corrected. This was something that could be done within the realm of political science because while “[t]he points of view themselves cannot be discussed, the understanding of the facts that constitute the prerequisite for the points of view can be”.⁷³ *Hvorfor Demokrati?* was therefore largely a discussion of the meaning of the concept “democracy”. Ross distinguished between three different understandings of democracy: (1) formal democracy, (2) real or economic democracy, and (3) democracy as an attitude or way of life, but strongly emphasised that it was the first of these, the formal or political meaning of democracy, which was the heart of the concept. Democracy, Ross argued, “indicates a *how*, not a *what*”. “It indicated how political decisions are made, not what these decisions are in substance. It designates a

⁷¹ Ibid., 93 f.

⁷² Ibid., 94.

⁷³ Ibid., 93.

method for the establishment of the ‘political will’, not its object, end, or means.” And the measure of the degree to which a form of government is democratic, Ross argued, was the majority principle.⁷⁴

It has been rendered somewhat surprising that Ross endorsed such a formal or procedural account of democracy at this point in time, when the experiences of Nazism might have provoked a stronger emphasis on the individual rights of citizens and minorities. In Ross’ view individual rights were merely prerequisites for a well-functioning majority principle, and thus inherently secondary to it. Joakim Nergelius and Lars Adam Rehof have presumed that Ross’ reluctance to include material considerations in his concept of democracy was connected to the value nihilistic theory on one hand, and the experiences of materially defined totalitarian regimes on the other.⁷⁵ However, even if the value nihilistic theory might have posed a psychological barrier, it hardly constituted an insurmountable logical obstacle for a more material definition of democracy. There was nothing in value nihilism that made a more moral or normative definition of democracy impossible, as long as these values were not presented as scientifically established truths.⁷⁶ Indeed, the high regard for the majority principle was also something of a valuation. Moreover, some philosophers that sympathised with value nihilism nevertheless opposed a restricted formal conception of democracy, perhaps most notably the Danish philosopher and communist Jørgen Jørgensen who included political, juridical, social, cultural as well as economical aspects in what he called “the wide democracy” (*det brede demokrati*).⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid., 75 f. and 91–94.

⁷⁵ Nergelius 1996, as footnote 14, 138; Rehof, Lars Adam: ”På sporet af pragmatismen i dansk retspleje”. In: Blume, Peter et al. (eds.): *Suum cuique – retsvidenskabelige afhandlinger, Københavns Universitet 1991*. København 1991, 30–49, here 41 f.

⁷⁶ And, perhaps more importantly, even if the Scandinavian Legal Realists, following the legal philosophy of Hägerström, were rather sceptical of the concept of individual rights, Ross (and Hedenius) belonged to a second generation of Legal Realists who criticised Hägerström and his more ardent disciples for dispatching of the whole concept of (individual) rights. The mission of Ross (and Hedenius) was, rather, to make it possible to talk about individual rights despite the “realistic” or “positivistic” outlook. Cf. Blandhol 1999, as footnote 12, 95–109; Strang 2009, as footnote 12.

⁷⁷ Jørgensen, Jørgen: *Det Demokratiske Samfund – Grundtræk af en Analyse*. København 1945.

But Nergelius and Rehof were undoubtedly right in claiming that the formal account of democracy was motivated by totalitarianism; however, arguably considerably less by Nazism than by Communism. *Hvorfor Demokrati?* was written as a contribution to the Great Danish Democracy Debate in the years following the Second World War, and the three conceptions of democracy that Ross discussed represented the three major standpoints in this debate.⁷⁸ The idea of democracy as a way of life was advocated by the theologian Hal Koch, who argued that peaceful conversation aiming at an acceptable compromise was the essence of democracy.⁷⁹ Ross did not make an issue of criticising Koch's notion of democracy. Although often presented as the main antagonists, Koch and Ross were more of allies in the Danish Democracy Debate. They both supported Social Democracy and they later collaborated as editors of the anthology *Nordisk Demokrati* (1949).⁸⁰ Rather, by emphasising that democracy concerned the form and not the content of political decisions, Ross was primarily trying to refute what he conceived of as communistic attempts to extend, or even colonise, the concept democracy by talking about "economic democracy" or "real democracy" like Jørgensen. According to Ross, the Danish communists adopted a Soviet-Russian rhetorical tactics of confusing democracy with a particular economical politics that would more appropriately be denoted by the term "socialism".⁸¹ The opposite of "democracy" is "autocracy" and the opposite of "socialism" is "capitalism", Ross argued, and it is possible to combine these in any way one pleases.⁸²

Thus, the formal account of democracy advocated by Ross closely resembled Tingsten's idea of a supra-ideology. Moreover, it also involved an analogous emphasis on shared values. In an article in *Tiden* in 1947 Ross argued that shared values and the sense of belonging to the same community constituted the framework that united the minority with the majority and made it possible for the minority to accept majority decisions.⁸³ Conversely, if a certain group of people, on a very fundamental level, dis-

⁷⁸ A number of central articles from the Danish Democracy Debate have been gathered in Rasmussen, Søren Hein and Niels Kayser Nielsen (red.): *Strid om demokratiet – Artikler fra en dansk debat*. Århus 2003.

⁷⁹ Koch, Hal: *Hvad er Demokrati?* København 1945.

⁸⁰ Koch and Ross 1949, as footnote 27.

⁸¹ Ross 1952, as footnote 70, 142.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 233.

⁸³ Ross, Alf: "Socialismen och demokratin". In: *Tiden* 39 (1947:7), 392–404.

agreed with the rest of the population, they would feel little or no respect for the decisions of the majority, and thus democracy itself would be in danger. In *Hvorfor Demokrati?* Ross argued that such conflicts, involving for example religious and national minorities, could only be resolved if the minority submitted to the majority, or if they created a separate political community.⁸⁴ But Ross also connected the idea of shared values to his struggle against the communists, arguing that democracy would deteriorate if a socialistic majority of 51% attempted to swiftly carry out a sweeping economic and social revolution. The minority would most likely opt out of the democratic community as they would no longer feel that they shared the same basic values as the majority. Thus, the only way of introducing socialism and planned economy according to Ross, was to do it piecemeal in order not to disturb the community of shared values.⁸⁵

Tingsten and Ross shared the formal understanding of democracy and both of them stressed the necessity of shared values, but their views clashed in the post-war debate on the compatibility of socialism and democracy. Tingsten, who had been a member of the Swedish Social Democratic Labour Party in the 1930s, became one of their loudest critics after the war. Inspired by reading F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* Tingsten became very attentive of the problems of realising socialism under democratic rule, and repeatedly accused the Swedish Social Democrats for neglecting the inherent dangers of a planned economy.⁸⁶ For Ross, on the other hand, criticism of the communists was intended to create a space for a political position that was socialist and democratic – i.e. Social Democratic. These sympathies, visible between the lines in *Hvorfor Demokrati?*, were explicitly pronounced in a number of partisan publications in the late

⁸⁴ Ross 1952, as footnote 70, 143 f.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 291; Ross 1947, as footnote 83, 397.

⁸⁶ Tingsten 1945, as footnote 15, 198–238. Besides the influence from Hayek, which Tingsten emphasises himself – for example in the afterwords of the 1967 edition of *Socialdemokratiens idéutveckling* (Tingsten 1967, as footnote 53, 389–391) Tingsten's conversion from Social Democracy has also been explained as a result of his own studies of the Social Democratic ideology in the early 1940s in combination with a general dissatisfaction with both the politics of and, perhaps even more importantly, the dominant role of the Social Democrats in Swedish politics. Cf. Johansson 1995, as footnote 54, 246–250.

1940s.⁸⁷ It soon became almost as important for Ross to respond to Hayek's liberal challenge as it had been to stand up against the communists.

Ross paid special attention to Hayek's argument that planned economy required a moral scale according to which different political actions and reforms are prioritised, and as it was impossible for the citizens of a nation to agree on such a scale, politics would be taken over by the experts, democratic control would diminish and totalitarianism would prevail.⁸⁸ Ross denied that planned economy had to be based on an objective philosophical moral standard; rather, Ross argued, the plan could be established through the "usual democratic majority procedure", and thus, it represented "the manifold evaluations, wishes, and considerations which actually live traditionally and assert themselves in a community".⁸⁹ In this way Ross tried to connect the voluntaristic aspect of value nihilism directly to the democratic procedure. As individuals are fundamentally autonomous on moral issues, the only way to deal with the situation is by voting and letting the majority rule. On the other hand, Ross undoubtedly believed that the democratic elaboration of an economic plan requires that people share the same values, at least to the extent that makes the acceptance of the decisions of the majority possible, otherwise the plan would endanger the democratic community. Thus one of the basic differences between Hayek and Ross was their views on the extent to which it is possible for a population to share the same values. While Hayek seemed to believe that the number of uncontested issues that could be subjected to planning in a democratically justifiable manner was rather limited,⁹⁰ Ross was quite optimistic. If construc-

⁸⁷ Ross, Alf: *Kommunismen og Demokratiet*. København 1945; Idem: "Hvorfor jeg stemmer paa socialdemokratiet". In: *SocialDemokraten*, 25th October 1945; Idem: "Kan man være socialist uden at være marxist?". In: *Verdens Gang* 2 (1948), 255–258. Ross' relationship to Social Democracy was, however, by no means unproblematic. Most apparently, as Henning Fonsmark has noticed, the concept of "economic democracy", that Ross emphatically criticised, appeared on almost every page of the economic chapter of the Social Democratic mission statement *Fremtidens Danmark* 1945. Some years later, when the Social Democrats collaborated with the socialists (*Socialistisk Folkeparti*) in the 1966 elections, Ross announced that he was no longer supporting them. Cf. Fonsmark, Henning: *Historien om den danske utopi*. København 1990, 62–65.

⁸⁸ Ross 1952, as footnote 70, 181–183; Hayek, Friedrich August: *The road to serfdom*. Chicago 1994 [1944], 63–70.

⁸⁹ Ross 1952, as footnote 70, 184; Ross 1947, as footnote 83, 401.

⁹⁰ Hayek 1944, as footnote 88, 68–70.

tion materials were scarce, Ross argued, it was easy to agree that proper housing must be prioritised over summer residences; it was equally easy to agree that the import of necessary raw materials must have priority over nuts and jam. There was undoubtedly a trait of scientism in Ross' view on this point. Referring to Mannheim and Schumpeter, Ross argued that it is likely that an increasing number of issues would be rendered non-political as a result of economic levelling and scientific progress, and that this would make the construction of a plan even less problematic.⁹¹

Given the Social Democratic credo of Ross, it is perhaps not very surprising that he transformed the idea of shared values from a prerequisite for democracy to a basis for effective economic planning. This was very similar to the philosophy of his friend Gunnar Myrdal, for whom a unanimous and homogenous population provided the most fruitful starting point for social engineering.⁹² It is more surprising that Tingsten, as a leading liberal voice in Sweden, continued to embrace the idea of shared values despite the fact that many other renowned liberal intellectuals, such as Hayek and Isaiah Berlin, endorsed moral pluralism and stressed that people as a matter of fact support different and incompatible values.⁹³ This difference was mirrored in their different conceptions of democracy. While Tingsten believed that democracy was essentially majority rule and thus thought that shared values was a necessary prerequisite for a well-functioning democratic society, Hayek was more concerned with the protection of individual freedom and the rights of citizens in a value pluralistic world characterised by disagreement rather than agreement. It is hardly insignificant that Tingsten looked upon things with Swedish eyes, while Hayek was writing as an Austrian refugee in Britain.

But the difference between Tingsten and Hayek can also be seen as a clash on the priority between liberalism and democracy. In his *Road to Serfdom* Hayek explicitly stated that democracy, unlike liberalism, should not be conceived of as an intrinsic value.⁹⁴ For Hayek, democracy was merely a means of realising internal peace and individual freedom. If forced to choose between democracy and liberalism he would

⁹¹ Ross 1952, as footnote 70, 185 and 189.

⁹² Cf. Sigurdsson 2000, as footnote 29, 149–152; Strang, Johan: "Gunnar Myrdal and the philosophy of social engineering". In: *Ideas in History* 2 (2007:2), 169–177.

⁹³ Berlin, Isaiah: *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Oxford 1958.

⁹⁴ Hayek 1944, as footnote 88, 78 f.

have taken the latter, while Tingsten undoubtedly, true to his supra-ideology thesis, would have preferred the former. Tingsten and Ross shared the formal conception of democracy, the view that the majority principle was the defining characteristic of democracy, and that democracy therefore ultimately required that the population share the same basic values. For them, democracy remained an over-ideology that was by no means synonymous to, but had to be prioritised over both liberalism and socialism.

The Value Nihilists and the Challenge of Democracy

There are of course many arguments that can be, and have been, raised against the ideas of Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross. The value nihilistic theory, which they conceived of as a more or less conclusive achievement of modern scientific philosophy, has since proven far from indisputable. The philosophical debate between moral realists and non-cognitivists is as vivid as ever, although not as explicitly connected to political currents as it was in the 1930s and 40s.⁹⁵ Democracy, on the other hand, has undoubtedly become a supra-ideology supported by all, but the formal or procedural account defended by Tingsten and Ross has – even in Scandinavia – become challenged by scholars who more strongly emphasise the importance of constitutional rights.⁹⁶ Finally, the emphasis of shared values certainly mirrors contemporary challenges for both ethics and democracy in the age of globalisation. But where the philosophers and social scientists of today look for ways to confront different value systems and cultures with each other in order to build a platform for discussion, the Scandinavian value nihilists seemed to think that everyone basically agreed, and that if people did not agree, discussion was fruitless. Indeed, one of the main problems with the accounts of Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross was that they hardly ever ventured to discuss the values that they thought were almost universally shared. Instead, they tended to take them more or less for granted. It is easy to follow Gunnar Skirbekk in his remark that there was little place for (normative) moral discussions in the Nordic coun-

⁹⁵ For a reasonably up-to-date account of the debate, see Miller, Alexander: *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics*. Cambridge 2003.

⁹⁶ One of the most recent and forceful claims is Nergelius 1996, as footnote 14.

tries after the Second World War – it was as if “the normative problem already had been solved” and the question that remained was merely an instrumental *how*.⁹⁷

From an international perspective it might appear as striking that in Scandinavia, the rise of totalitarianism and the catastrophe of the Second World War did not lead to a rejection of positivistic thinking and relativistic moral theories. On the contrary, the Scandinavian value nihilists were in fact able to strengthen their positions in the 1930s and 40s, and in 1949 Hedenius confidently claimed that the modern nihilistic philosophy which he represented formed “an important part of the spiritual culture of the Nordic countries”.⁹⁸ Of course, to a large extent the explanation for this curiosity has to be institutional. While the positivist philosophers were driven to exile from the European continent, the Scandinavian value nihilists attained key positions both at the universities and in the public debate. They became recognised professors and were thus able to influence a whole generation of students. Moreover, they were also the authors of a number of well-read books, and figured as writers and columnists in important publications such as *Tiden* and *Dagens Nyheter*.

However, a significant part of the explanation must also be that the value nihilists did rather well in the debate on democracy and totalitarianism. Not necessarily in the sense that they presented philosophically superior or “correct” arguments, but rather, that they succeeded in reconciling their philosophy with contemporary political ideas. By emphasising the rift between science and politics, Hedenius was able to defeat the allegations of a connection to totalitarianism while simultaneously updating value nihilism with the latest international philosophical trends. Tingsten succeeded in overcoming the restraints of value nihilism and developed a critical method by which (totalitarian) ideologies were disproven as irrational and erroneous. And Ross demarcated “democracy” in a way that refuted the communist attempts at colonising the concept without censuring socialist politics under democratic forms.

⁹⁷ “Hos oss, mærkeleg nok, utløyste ikkje krigen ei slik ny normativ gjennomtenking. Hos oss var spørsmålet primært korleis det heile kunne skje. [...] Det normative spørsmålet var liksom allereie løyst. Alle gode nordmenn visste kva som var rett og rangt.” Skirbekk, Gunnar: ”’I refleksjonens mangel...’ Om vekslende intellektuelle elitar i norsk etterkrigstid”. In: *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift* 1 (1984:1), 21–37, here 31.

⁹⁸ ”... en icke oviktig bestandsdel i Nordens andliga kultur”. Hedenius 1949, as footnote 27, 207.

Even the idea of shared values can be said to have fallen rather well in its historic-political context. The value nihilists were far from alone in stressing the significance of shared values in a democratic community. As noted above, Alf Ahlberg's criticism of value nihilism was based on an assumption that the theory undermined the shared values that were a precondition for democracy. From this perspective, the task for the value nihilists was to make sense of the idea of shared values within the framework of their own philosophy, and this was what Hedenius did when pointing to the fact that people can share values even if they do not believe that these values are objective, absolute or true. However, the idea of shared values was undoubtedly also connected to the culturally nationalistic rhetoric prevalent in Scandinavian political language at this point in time, and it is noteworthy that the "positivist" philosophy and the value nihilistic theory did not prevent Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross from contributing to this rhetoric. Even if they were quite sceptical of (especially German) *völkisch* ideas, refuting them as idealistic metaphysics, they still gladly referred to the Nordic democratic heritage and to the (alleged) homogeneity of their countries as part of their defences of democracy.

There were certainly many debatable aspects in the theories of Hedenius, Tingsten and Ross. But evaluated as moves in a particular historical context, i.e. as attempts to rebut the allegations of a connection to totalitarianism and to reconcile value nihilism with democracy, they must be seen as quite successful. Value nihilism was, in Scandinavia, no longer associated with totalitarianism, but rather, with modern, rational and democratic attitudes.