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The values and attitudes of high-income earners in Sweden

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> Of course, I know that I earn a good salary; I know what salary I have, but I rarely think about it and I spend quite a lot of time with people who are not among the top 10% highest... except my colleagues of course [...]. Of course, I know I belong [there], but I don't think about it. I probably wouldn't think of myself as one of them. (Erika, a doctor)

Introduction

Erika, a doctor, does not identify as a high-income earner, even though she is well aware that her salary makes her one. Several other Swedish high-income earners that were interviewed think along similar lines.[1] They do not see themselves as particularly affluent; in Erika's words, they do not think of themselves "as one of them". This report looks at Swedish high-income earners' values and attitudes to meritocracy, redistribution, and inequality.[2]

In the decades following the Second World War, inequality in Sweden decreased. The period between 1944 and 1974 was characterised by reduced income and wealth gaps (Bengtsson et al. 2012) and coincided with the expansion of the Swedish welfare state. Indeed, one of the welfare state's main purposes was, as Edlund (1999:106) notes, "to decrease market-generated inequalities." During the decades that the welfare state expanded, governments decreased economic inequality through a high degree of control over the economy via taxation on capital, capital controls, financial regulation, and a large public sector.

Therborn (2018) describes the 1980s as a turning point for inequality in Sweden. He argues that it was the product of ascendant right-wing politics, which led to neo-liberal policies and the emergence of financial capitalism. The labour movement no longer had the same influence. As a result, Sweden has experienced increases in inequality for several decades. The incomes of the Swedish "power elite" illustrate this increase. The "power elite" is a group consisting of 200 CEOs, top-level politicians and civil servants whose incomes the Swedish blue-collar trade union confederation Landsorganisationen (LO), has measured since the

[1] In this report, we look at the top 10 % of high-income earners. "Top 10%" refers to the top decile of income earners in Sweden. Income is defined as gross labour income, that is: income before tax, and excluding capital incomes. The income distribution is often divided into deciles, that is in groups of 10%. The top 10% is the 10th decile. Expressed in percentiles, the top 10 % is P90.

[2] The research has been conducted on behalf of Arenagruppen. Thanks go to Love Bohman, Paul Fuehrer, Tove Sohlberg and Pär Zetterberg for contributing with their statistical expertise. We would also like to thank Kristina Boréus and Magnus Wennerhag for valuable comments on an earlier version of this text.

year 1950. In 1950, the power elite's average pre-tax income corresponded to 11.1 times the average wage of industrial workers. In 1980, this difference was at its lowest, at 4.9 times. However, in 2017, this figure reached 19.6 (Almqvist 2019).

A well-used, although criticised, measure of income inequality is the Gini coefficient. Sweden's Gini coefficient for 2018 was 0.275, the ninth lowest in the OECD (OECD 2021). Recent developments have benefitted the wealthiest part of the population. The OECD (2019a) notes that "income has increased for all income groups in Sweden, but more strongly in the upper part of the distribution." As indicated by the OECD (2015):

> The growth in inequality between 1985 and the early 2010s was the largest among all OECD countries, increasing by one third. In 2012, the average income of the top 10% of income earners was 6.3 times higher than that of the bottom 10%. This is up from a ratio of around 5.75 to 1 in 2007 and a ratio of around 4 to 1 during much of the 1990s.

Since the mid-1990s, income differences have increased, mainly due to strong income growth in the upper part of the distribution, with capital incomes becoming ever more important at the top (Långtidsutredningen 2019:10).[3] Roine and Waldenström (2010:330) note that there are important differences between Sweden and other continental European countries, arguing that the growth in gains from capital makes Sweden closer to Anglo-Saxon countries:

> By 1950 top income shares had already dropped more in Sweden than in any other country […] and the further increases in marginal taxes as well as 'solidarity wage policies' caused them to drop even further in the 1970s. However, the most remarkably different aspect in the Swedish data appears over the past decades. During this period, when top income shares increased significantly in Anglo-Saxon countries, mainly due to wage increases, but remained virtually unchanged in continental Europe, the Swedish development depends largely on how realized capital gains are treated. If we include realized capital

[3] As noted by Boschini, Gunnarsson and Roine (2017:2) previous studies on top incomes have "shown the importance of distinguishing between different sources of income, in particular to consider incomes from capital, and also to study the diverse developments across different groups within the top of the income distribution."

> gains, Swedish top income shares look like the Anglo-Saxon ones; if we do not include them top income shares have increased slightly but still resemble the continental European experience.

This report focuses on how Swedish high-income earners view such developments. There are several reasons why high-income earners' opinions and political values are important to study. One is that, in recent decades, there have been changes to Swedish redistributive policies that favour high-income earners. It is therefore interesting to know more about high-income earners' views on equality and social responsibility. Another important reason is that there is a lack of qualitative research on groups with power and influence in society (see Eriksson, Holmqvist, and Sohl 2018; Holmqvist 2018b).

The report is based on 25 interviews with members of this group carried out in 2019, and survey data from the European Social Survey (ESS, 2008, 2012 and 2016) and the European Survey of Income and Living Conditions (EU-SILC, 2016).[4] It is important to note that the ESS constructs its income variable on self-reported household income, while individual salary is the basis for the interview sample. This means that we do not know how much the individual respondents to the ESS survey actually earn, only that they consider themselves as belonging to the top decile. Approximately 15% of the respondents to ESS have judged themselves to be in the highest decile in terms of household income. It is also worth noticing that in the ESS, it is the household's total income, after tax and deductions and from all sources, that is reported. Furthermore, the ESS data has a limited sample size. For the background on high-income earners in Sweden, data is used from EU-SILC, which collects cross-sectional and multidimensional longitudinal microdata on income and living conditions.[5] For the purpose of sampling for the interviews, this text uses a monthly income of SEK 49,200 (2018. See more details below) as the threshold for belonging to the top 10%, based on EU-SILC data.

This text begins by describing the Swedish socio-economic context, high-income earners in Sweden, and the interview sample. An analysis of the interview material begins with the interviewees' perceptions of meritocracy and upward mobility and is followed by

[4] Emil Frisk has provided us with the statistics from the European Social Survey. In the data from ESS and EU-SILC used in this text, all differences between the top 10% of high-income earners and the rest of the population are significant at a significance level of at least 95% (or p-value <.05).

[5] Data from Sweden was updated in 2016.

their perceived economic security and their attitudes to economic inequality, the welfare state, taxation and social responsibility. The last section contains an analysis of the political participation and civic engagement of the respondents.

Background: the Swedish context

In 1900, Sweden had "more severe economic inequality than the United States" (Bengtsson 2019:40). The Swedish working class was, however, as Bengtsson (2019:35) puts it, "the most well organized in the world." Partly thanks to successful labour organising, in the 1920s, the foundations were laid for a welfare state that was seen as an answer to the conflict between capital and labour. When Esping-Andersen (1990/1998) developed his influential – if contested – categorisation of welfare regimes, he described the Swedish welfare state as a social democratic project. He regarded Scandinavian welfare states as the most successful in dealing with inequalities. Esping-Andersen highlights the ability of the social democratic welfare state regime to create solidarity between the middle and the working class through the social insurance systems. Social justice and increased equality were particularly important (Korpi 1978). One goal for the Social Democratic Party and the labour movement during that period was the elevation of the working class by providing access to housing, healthcare, and unemployment and health insurance through the welfare system.

In more recent research, the image of the welfare state as a social democratic project is seen as an oversimplification, not least because it was based on "the reformist alliance between the liberal intelligentsia and the labour movement" (Bengtsson 2019:37). The Swedish welfare state project was based on a class compromise (see Fraser 2003) and the creation of what de los Reyes (2006:7) calls a "consensus around the social order, even if the content of the welfare state has been the subject of political negotiations and ideological conflicts".[6]

This shaped the self-image of Swedish society and gave the country a reputation for being among the most equal in the world (Pred 2000). According to de los Reyes (2006), the emergence of the Swedish welfare model was based on the ideal of equality through redistribution, and hence that access to welfare would be equal for all.

[6] Our translation.

Still, Swedes have access to relatively generous universal public services, such as subsidised healthcare, free education, and universal benefits such as child and parental benefits. Childcare and public transportation are subsidised, though the level of service varies between municipalities.[7] Public transfers that depend on income include sick leave compensation, unemployment benefits and pensions. In 2003, a state inquiry concluded that only 18% of public revenues were spent on redistribution between individuals. The remainder, over 80% of resources, were redistributed over individuals' life courses (Pettersson and Pettersson 2003:85).

However, the Swedish welfare state has its limitations. For example, Pringle (2011:145-146) has suggested that, when comparing the UK and Sweden, the "state-collective" and consensus-oriented Swedish system has in some ways been relatively unsuccessful in challenging racial or gender inequality. Furthermore, as noted by Fritzell (2011), high poverty rates for those with migrant backgrounds go against the equality ideals of the Nordic countries.

In addition, neo-liberal reforms during recent decades – for example the introduction of voucher systems in school – have changed the character of the public sector. Changes have been particularly striking in primary and secondary education. In 1992, a charter school reform was introduced, along with a voucher system. Privately-run charter schools entitled to public funding began to emerge. Today, schools are run either by municipalities, independent non-profit providers, or increasingly, for-profit school corporations. Charter schools funded by public money are not allowed to charge fees, but they can freely choose where to establish themselves. The charter school reform has increased school segregation based on ethnic and class backgrounds, and has thus led to increased educational inequality (see Allelin 2019; Eurofound 2017; Nyström 2012).

[7] Swedes have access to free primary and secondary education and universal student grants, including tuition-free tertiary education.

Policy changes have contributed to increased inequality

During the last three decades, a number of policy changes have contributed to increased inequality, tending to benefit the relatively well-off. Particularly since the start of the 21st century, there have been extensive changes to the Swedish tax system. As described by the OECD (2015:1): "[i]n Sweden, like in most other Nordic countries, tax reforms over the 1990s have decreased the tax burden also and sometimes particularly for wealthier households, e.g., by decreasing capital taxation and lowering or abandoning wealth taxation." In 2005, both the inheritance and gift taxes were abolished by the social democratic government. The wealth tax was abolished in 2007 by the right-wing coalition government, which led to an increase in wealth inequality primarily due to "more unequal holdings of apartments and bank savings" (Lundberg and Waldenström 2018:540). Since the abolition of the wealth tax, there have been no official statistics on wealth, since banks and other financial entities are no longer obliged to provide data on financial assets and liabilities (Bengtsson et al. 2012). In 2007, earned income tax credits were introduced by the right-wing coalition government and expanded until 2014. With this policy, disposable income increased substantially for those with a job. At the same time, the government tightened both payments from and access to social security for those outside the labour market, including unemployment benefits and sick leave, which could be described as benefits austerity. Tax deductions benefitting high-income earners include those for the repair and renovation of self-owned housing (ROT-deduction, not available for tenants); for domestic services such as cleaning, baby-sitting and gardening (RUT-deduction, introduced in 2007); for interest rates on mortgages; and pension savings.[8]

The tax deduction for domestic services has been widely debated and, as shown by Anving and Eldén (2016), its effect has been an increase in class, "race" and gender inequalities. Gavanas (2010:10) argues that the growth of the domestic service sector should be understood in relation to the downsizing of the welfare state system: "[t]he Swedish market for domestic service is expanding as a result of welfare state cutbacks, as well as privatization of public care, deregulation, internationalization and

[8] ROT is an abbreviation for repairs, conversions, and extensions, and RUT stands for cleaning, maintenance, and laundry. If you hire a person to do these services in your household, you can apply for a ROT or RUT deduction on the labour cost (Swedish Tax Agency 2020-03-18).

flexibilization of labour markets." Furthermore, in 2020, the additional state income tax – collected from annual incomes over SEK 689,300 – was removed, which means that the well-off will pay less tax. This has tilted the redistributive profile of the government budget for 2020 heavily in favour of the top 10% of income earners (Swedish Government 2019a).

The privatisation of welfare that began in the 1990s has transformed relations between public and private capital (Allelin et al. 2018). An example of this is housing. Polanska and Richard (2019:142) show:

> The national housing regime is regarded as a cornerstone of Sweden's welfare politics. This model, introduced in the country after the Second World War, is internationally distinguished for its universality and egalitarian approach, such as its high percentage of public housing, strong tenants' rights and exceptionally good standard in housing.

Polanska and Richard argue that at least three decades of deregulation have resulted in "high levels of residential segregation" as well as "increasing displacement of low-income households [and] the creation of 'urban nomads' (people moving several times due to renovations and raised rents)" (Ibid.:142).

Furthermore, since the 1980s, Swedish firms have increasingly become part of globalised production chains. Capital controls were abolished in 1989, and in 1995, Sweden joined the EU and the WTO. As noted by Pareliussen et al., (2018:53): "[p]olicies to redistribute wealth have weakened considerably in the Nordics over the past few decades, partly as a response to globalisation, and encouraged by organised interests from the business community." Beginning in the 1980s, in Sweden, as elsewhere, financial deregulation took place with the objective of enhancing growth. Roine (2014) points out that such policy changes were mainly about deregulating the financial sector and shrinking the tax system. In Sweden, these policies contributed to a bursting housing bubble and a banking crisis in 1990-91, whose repercussions were felt throughout the 1990s. The political answer to the ensuing economic crisis was a further neoliberalisation of the economy: the privatisation of parts of the public sector; the institution of a purportedly independent central bank; and the setting of an inflation target given priority over full employment. In 2008, however, Sweden was not as severely hit as other European countries.

In terms of its labour market, Sweden is characterised by a high rate of employment: 77.1% of the working age population were employed in the last quarter of 2019 (OECD 2020). Levels of union density are high, particularly among white-collar employees, which is unique in an international perspective. While union density has decreased in general, levels of union membership have remained high: they were 77% in 2006 and 67% in 2018 (72% among white-collar employees; see Kjellberg 2019:7). An even larger percentage of the workforce is covered by collective bargaining agreements: nine out of ten (Ibid.:8). There has not been any substantial increase in the proportion of temporary employment during the past ten years. However, it is important to note that precarisation has increased, since temporary jobs have become more insecure (Wingborg 2019).[9]

High-income earners in Sweden

Based on Statistics Sweden's (2018a) data on salary dispersion by sector, the lower threshold of the top 10% high-income group is a monthly wage of SEK 49,200 before tax. For women, this is SEK 45,000 and for men SEK 53,100, while the average monthly wage in 2018 was SEK 34,600 before tax (Statistics Sweden 2018a). According to data from EU-SILC (2016), women are clearly under-represented among the top 10% high-income earners.

However, as shown by Boschini, Gunnarsson and Roine (2017:3), the proportion of women in the top decile has "steadily increased since the 1970s. In the distribution of total income (including capital gains) the proportion of women in the top 10 group more than doubled from about 12% in 1974 to about 28% in 2013." Their study indicates that realised capital gains have an influence on the gender composition of the top decile. In 1995, the proportion of total income of the top 10% in Sweden was 19.7%. In 2017, the proportion of the top 10% had risen to 27.2 % of total income (Swedish Government 2019b:27). The number of high-income earners in the top 10% increases after the age of 35 and begins to decline from the age of 60 (EU-SILC 2016).

Individuals with excellent marks in upper secondary school have a higher probability of becoming high-income earners later in life than those with lower grades. However, the likelihood of those with excellent marks in upper secondary school becoming high-income earners is greater for men than for women (Statistics Sweden

[9] Parts of the discussion on the Swedish welfare state in this section is based on Sohl (2014).

2017). Income is to a great degree related to education: high-income earners tend to have higher educational levels than the rest of the Swedish population (ESS 2016). Within the top 10%, 55% belong to the highest education category in the ISCED classification; that is, they have tertiary education (EU-SILC 2016).[10] It is worth noticing that approximately 35% of the top 10% have upper secondary education qualifications as their highest qualifications and are not currently enrolled in higher education (EU-SILC 2016). However, this was true of only two interviewees in our sample.

In terms of national origin, the majority (89.5%) of the top 10% were born in Sweden, compared to 80.1% among the rest of the population. Geographically, high-income earners are over-represented in Mälardalen, western Sweden (Gothenburg), and southern Sweden (ESS 2016). They also tend to move to the same neighbourhoods within cities, which is particularly evident in Stockholm (Statistics Sweden 2018c).

According to ESS (2016) data, high-income earners are more likely to vote in national elections than the rest of the population. They are also more likely to vote for right-of-centre parties. As reported by Jylhä, Rydgren, and Strimling (2019:64): "[h]aving a high income is most common among Conservative voters: 29 percent of Conservative voters have a monthly income of over 40,000 SEK, which may be compared with 16 percent of Social Democrat voters and 14 percent of Sweden Democrat voters." Research on political values shows that people in higher class positions tend to be on the right on questions concerning the economy.[11] They also tend to be more libertarian on the libertarian/ authoritarian dimension.[12] In contrast, the working class is likely to be on the left on questions concerning the economy and hold authoritarian attitudes regarding culture and individual liberty. Class can explain political attitudes on the right/left

[10] It refers to the highest completed education level or, for those still in the education system, their current level. The International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) is a statistical framework for comparing education across countries. This classification is designed by UNESCO. According to UNESCO's definition, tertiary education includes academic education as well as advanced vocational or professional education. It comprises ISCED levels: 5 (short-cycle tertiary education), 6 (Bachelors or equivalent level), 7 (Masters or equivalent level) and 8 (Doctoral or equivalent) (UNESCO, 2012).

[11] In this text, the interviewees are considered to be on the left if they voted for the Social Democrats, the Left Party, the Green Party, and Feminist Initiative in the last election. Those who voted for the Moderate Party, the Centre Party, the Liberals, and the Christian Democrats – that is, the parties that in the 2018 election still constituted the so-called Alliance – are placed on the right. We also include the Sweden Democrats on the right.

[12] The category "Libertarian" includes attitudes in favour of cultural diversity, individual freedom, acceptance of minority groups and freedom from authority. "Authoritarian" includes a belief in social hierarchy and intolerance of cultural differences and non-conformity.

dimension, but level of education is the main factor in position on the libertarian/authoritarian dimension (Bengtsson, Berglund and Oskarson 2013; Berglund and Oskarson 2010). In the US context, Gilens (2012) has found that the top 10% of income earners are more likely than the rest of the population to take a number of positions that in many contexts are considered left-wing, such as liberal views on abortion, immigration, and same-sex marriage, while at the same time leaning to the right on economic issues.

The interview study

In total, the interview sample consists of 25 semi-structured interviews, which lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.[13] Our questions concerned seven themes: background, self-perception, perceptions on inequality and social distance, views on the reason for inequality, the welfare state/policy, political engagement and responsibility for solidarity in society. The interview included questions about education, career path, parents' background, whether they saw themselves as high-income earners, views about equality in society, thoughts about the development of society and whether they had any worries about that development, views about taxes and whether they thought that any particular tax should be changed, what parts of the welfare system they thought were most important in general and what parts were most important for them (and their family), whether they were politically engaged, whether they voted in the last election, whether they had been a member of a political party and whether they had donated money to charity.

The interviewees were selected on the basis of their salary.[14] In the sample, respondents have a range of monthly wage incomes from SEK 50,000 to 400,000, reflecting the top 10 % of income earners (Statistics Sweden 2018a).[15] Six interviewees also receive bonuses. In addition, we actively looked for people who are in the highest income group, the top 1%, and three of the interviewees belong to this group.

We used a combination of convenience sampling and strategic selection to include respondents from different income levels and from occupations common to high-income earners. A convenience

[13] Twenty-four interviews were conducted by Mikael Svensson and one by Lena Sohl. They were conducted in Swedish, and were recorded and transcribed. We have translated the quotes in this text into English. The quotes from the interviews have been slightly edited for readability. The interview study has been audited and approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in 2018.

[14] The interviewees were asked about their average monthly income.

[15] The income data is based on what the interviewees reported during the interviews.

sample was chosen due to the relatively limited time frame for the study.[16] We also chose to recruit interviewees through strategic sampling, aiming to cover specific profiles. In practice, interviewees were recruited both through contacts and by emailing all employees in seven workplaces where many high-income earners work.

Of the 25 respondents interviewed, ten are women and 15 are men. Ten respondents are 35-40 years old, nine are 41-50, four are 51-60, and two are over 60. Seventeen work in the private sector and eight in the public sector. The sample is dominated by those living in Stockholm (16 out of 25) and other places in Mälardalen (4). Of the rest, three live in Gothenburg and two in cities in the north of Sweden. Twenty-four respondents were born in Sweden, one in another western European country. Of those born in Sweden, one has parents who were both born in another western European country, and one has one parent who was born in the US. Twenty-three interviewees have higher education qualifications, while two have upper secondary education qualifications as their highest qualification. Twenty-two participants have partners.

In the sample we have more interviewees on the left politically than among the group of high-income earners at large. One explanation may have to do with who are willing to participate in an interview study about high-income earners. Another explanation could be that the research was carried out on behalf of Arena, which is perceived by politically interested people as a left-wing organisation. However, one advantage of having this kind of sample is that it has allowed us to see differences between those with left-wing and those with right-wing attitudes.

Their paths to belonging to this segment of the population differ: some were born into families where both parents were highly educated high-income earners; others came to belong to this group through educational and career pathways. They are therefore diverse in terms of their family background, inheritance, education, and social networks. There is also an interesting dissociation within this group in relation to lifestyle. Several interviewees describe their own lifestyle as being markedly different from what they associate with high-income earners. Several of our interviewees vote for right-of-centre parties. However, it is worth noting that we also have several left-leaning respondents, both in terms of voting and in relation to their own self-description. Thus, there is greater differentiation in terms of values and attitudes among the

[16] Although a convenience sample make the results more difficult to generalise (Bryman 2018), that is not the main goal of qualitative research.

interviewees than might have been expected based on the usual perception of high-income earners.

Perceptions of meritocracy and upward mobility

As Eurofound (2017a:4) describes, social fluidity can be used as "an indicator of societal openness" as well as of "the inequality between individuals from different occupational classes in terms of their chances of occupying one destination class rather than another." Eurofound reports decreasing social fluidity in Sweden over the three age cohorts studied (born 1927-1945, 1946-1964, and 1965-1975), and for both men and women. Eurofound (2017a:32) explains this decrease as follows:

> An increase in the freedom of choice in public services (for example, school choice) has widened the gap between families, income inequalities have increased and income redistribution has decreased. It remains an open question whether a reduction in mobility in Sweden is temporary or not.

In the interview material used for this report, there are three different aspects to perceptions of meritocracy and upward mobility: 1) Several interviewees focus on the Swedish education system as crucial to achieving equality. 2) When it comes to their own career trajectory, the interviewees tell us they attained their position thanks to the education system, their (class) background, hard work, opportunities (structural preconditions), luck and social skills. 3) The interviewees see a connection between success and hard work, though some acknowledge that not all who work hard get their just rewards.

Access to higher education is therefore presented as essential by our respondents. Although higher education is free of charge in Sweden, working-class children are under-represented in higher education (see Bengtsson et al. 2012). Thus, class differences are reproduced within the education system (Isopahkala-Bouret et al. 2018; Holmqvist 2018a). Several interviewees talk about the fact that education divides Sweden along class lines. Some present this as an information problem: if people knew about available opportunities, they would take advantage of them. For instance, Carl uses his own upbringing, in an upwardly mobile family, to describe the conditions of those with a privileged background.

Whether higher education is considered a possibility is, according to Carl, clearly dependent on class. Against this backdrop, he believes the education system should remain free, including universities. He also thinks that the fact that education is free for all should be more widely disseminated.

For Carl, the importance of education is clear when other people assume that he comes from a family of lawyers because he is a lawyer himself. He sees education as especially important for families who, like his, have a migrant background, "[e]ducation is a stepping stone, I think." He told us that the downward class mobility experienced in the earlier generations of his family was reversed thanks to the opportunities provided via welfare policies.

Several other interviewees also emphasise that, thanks to the Swedish education system being free, they have had access to higher education regardless of their class background. Some have highly educated parents with a working-class background, while others are the first in their family to have gone onto higher education. Education is central to several interviewees' narratives, with the majority seeing their pursuit of higher education as logical in the context of their class backgrounds. For instance, Erika raises the subject of her upbringing at the beginning of the interview: "[I] think I have a fairly typical Swedish middle-class background. Dad was the first in his family who went on to higher education, he is a civil engineer. Mum worked as a secretary." Others, like Antonia, who has middle-class professional parents, think their family expected them to go to university. Sara, who works as a doctor, told us it is not possible to fail once you manage to get into medical school. She adds that there was "no discussion" at home about whether she should attend university.

As mentioned earlier, the interviewees tend to explain where they have ended up by recourse to education, hard work, opportunities, luck, and social skills. Lars tells us about opportunities, luck, and his ability to take advantage of circumstances: "[I] would say that it is largely by chance and the will to seize them [opportunities], when they come". According to Bastani and Waldenström (2019), high-income earners, more often than others, think that a person's economic position is a result of effort and hard work. In our interviews, hard work is a recurring theme. An example of stressing the importance of hard work comes from Annika, who is head of a department of a local government: "[I'] m not very smart [laughs] and I haven't been very specialised in anything either. But then I'm a pretty ambitious person."

It is worth noticing, however, that few claim their own talent or effort is the only explanation for their favourable position. It also seems that several interviewees do not see a strong link between success and hard work, though some do make this connection. One is Helena, a medical professor, who believes that those who make an effort get more, but this does not necessarily mean they get what they deserve. Others, like Rikard, working in the medical industry, argue that there is no connection between the effort people make and their financial situation: "[n]o. Absolutely, no, no, no. Absolutely not." Early in the interview, Rikard notes that, although people who work as carpenters or nurses have demanding jobs, they are not rewarded in proportion to their hard work, especially when compared to the pay more privileged people might get, regardless of their effort. Markus, who works in the IT sector, also tells us he is not sure there is a connection between effort and reward:

> In some cases, yes, but then you also have classes, such as nursing assistants, who work very much, work nights, or warehouse workers who work really hard physically, but maybe do not earn so much. So that's unfairly distributed, I think. Then there are also some people who maybe kind of just surf along because of their social backgrounds. For me it has been quite easy, maybe only because of my social skills.

As for who tends not to get their fair share, Markus, like Rikard, thinks first of working-class occupations. Markus adds another dimension: the importance of people's class background. He acknowledges that while some work hard without being paid well, others earn well thanks to their upbringing and the social skills that come with it. Markus claims his social skills enabled him to reach the place he is in. He tells us: "[I] have had a very privileged background. Had parents who were well-off economically and we as family had it safe." In addition, Hugo, who is a programmer, explains why he managed to get a coveted job with a high salary: "[y]es, I am white and a man [laughter] and it probably has a lot to do with it." When explaining how he ended up where he is, Markus does not bring up hard work, but rather it is his social skills that represented the defining factor, identified as essential for becoming part of the Swedish elite (Holmqvist 2017).

Some interviewees also highlight gendered dimensions of inequality, for instance when Markus takes the example of a nursing assistant, a low paid female-dominated occupation in

which people work hard for little pay. An interesting view on injustice emerges: people in working-class occupations might work hard in demanding jobs without getting a fair wage while others – as Markus and Hugo point out – are better paid thanks to their privileges in terms of class, gender, and being born in Sweden. Nevertheless, and regardless of whether they sympathise with the left or the right, a majority believe there is some connection between working hard and the situation in which people find themselves. For them, effort does have a reward, if uneven. This argument is most prevalent among those on the right. Some interviewees on the left talk about unequal opportunities in education and several, as mentioned earlier, point out that people in working-class positions often work hard for little reward.

Education is central for the majority of interviewees, as it opens up possibilities for upward mobility – hence the importance of the education system being free of charge. It should also be noted that, as part of the neo-liberal shift of the Swedish welfare state: "[t]he understanding of upward mobility changed from a collective project to an individual responsibility to improve one's life conditions" (Sohl 2018a:96). The interviewees express support for one of the core tenets of the Swedish welfare state that working-class children should have access to higher education (see Sohl 2018a), even though the system has always been stratified.

High-income earners in Sweden: an economically secure group

According to ESS data, respondents who consider themselves as belonging to the top 10% highest income households feel economic security to a greater extent than the rest. There have been no major changes over time, but the proportion of the group who answered "Living comfortably on present income" has increased slightly over the years. Compared to 2008, the group of high-income earners feels even safer in 2016 (ESS 2008 & 2016). A majority reported that they feel they can live comfortably on their income in 2016. According to ESS (2016) very few high-income earners in Sweden claim to have difficulty in making ends meet. This might explain why higher salaries do not seem to be especially important for the interviewees in deciding what jobs to pursue. Rather, they are more likely to be motivated by new challenges in their working lives. In addition, high-income earners, as explained earlier, have benefitted from a number of changes to the tax system.

In line with survey data, our interviewees also describe a feeling of economic security. Our interviews indicate that this feeling of economic security might be linked to their stable position in the labour market, which they expect to maintain. Indeed, our participants are not worried about unemployment. None of our interviewees worry about money. This was evident, for example, when they were asked whether they ever feel like they do not have enough money. For several interviewees, this just does not happen. Amanda, who runs a business with several employees, told us:

> I earn 49 [000 SEK] and then I have other side jobs that increase the tax rate, but… I thought that I would have… that I had more. Since I have never experienced the money running out, do you understand what I mean?

Similarly, Helena tells us that she barely knows how much she earns nowadays. She adds that it is "embarrassing" to negotiate her salary as she already earns so much.

Some interviewees mention situations in which they would have liked to have more economic resources. Despite the fact that he works part-time and has an income that places him comfortably above the top 10% threshold, Sebastian mentions housing costs and says he would not be able to make renovations to his current flat, or move into the inner city of Stockholm, "[I] could not afford that, so that feels like a financial limitation." However, these comments that interviewees, like Sebastian, make are not about being unable to meet their necessities, but rather about not being able to spend at the level they would wish and in comparison to those earning more.

Sebastian, who works in the financial industry and was born in another western European country, tells us that he does not really feel like a high-income earner: "I do not feel rich or financially flexible." He compares himself to those with high incomes born in Sweden, claiming that there are notable differences between them and him. He notes that often, those high-income earners who were born in Sweden have inherited assets that span generations:

> Yes, the monthly salary I may agree on [makes him a high-income earner], but if you look at my Swedish colleagues who grew up and have had a family here, there is much more prosperity behind them. Of course, you don't travel during the summer because your family has a summer house.

While Sebastian agrees that his monthly salary qualifies him as a high-income earner, he is not as wealthy as his colleagues who were raised in Sweden and who have assets. To be a native Swede is here used as signifying a distinction from other high-income earners who have immigrated to Sweden and have no inherited assets in the form of, for example, summer houses. Inherited assets are associated with a class-specific Swedishness. Although many, like Sebastian, play down their own position in relation to others who are better off, they still express awareness that they are high income earners. Cristian, a lawyer, compares himself with colleagues in other countries:

> If you compare yourself to the Germans and the British […], you are hardly seen as a high-income earner. They earn so much more. From a Swedish perspective, yes, I probably do [earn a lot]. It can sometimes hit me... I don't feel like I can spend money on whatever I want.

Nevertheless, Cristian adds that even though they cannot afford what he calls “mega excesses”, he and his partner do not have to save to buy what they want. Thus, the interviewees tend to compare themselves first with those who earn more than they do. These comparisons could be understood as a way of marking class-based boundaries, but also as attempts to play down their own privilege, which chimes with previous research on Swedish middle and upper classes (Sohl 2018b). Especially those who live in Stockholm tend to draw these kinds of boundaries, and they tend to compare themselves with people living near them. One example is Susann, a medical doctor. Following her divorce, she now rents a house in a very affluent area of the city, and claims her family is “the poorest where I live”. She tells us that although she has a high salary, she cannot get a mortgage as she has no savings.

Several interviewees, however, are well aware of their relative privilege. This applies regardless of whether they are at the top of our sample or in the lower income range. Even though Susann tells us that she cannot get a mortgage to buy the house she wants, she describes her life circumstances: "[I] belong to those who lead a good life. I live beautifully, I have my animals, I have everything.” Likewise, Daniel tells us his family never has to consider how much things cost: "[t]hat is a great privilege, I think." Previous research on middle and upper-class women in Sweden (Sohl 2018b), has found that they often describe their lives as “good” and “privileged”. In this study, it is also clear that high-income earners are aware of their privilege and that their earnings are good in comparison to

most, even though most interviewees do not think about it very often in their daily lives.

Interestingly, several interviewees also make distinctions upwards. For instance, Henrik compares himself to those “at the top”: "[I] am really not at the top. It is a huge difference to be at the top in terms of pay. Then you can really talk about being very wealthy.” Similarly, Lars who is at the top of our sample in terms of income, tells us about his experience at a colleague's wedding: “[s]uddenly, I realised everyone he knew had gone to Lundsberg [a prestigious private school] with him. And that is not something I did, so it is a world which I am not in at all.” Other interviewees also mention those “above” them in the social hierarchy, who have more than their fair share, thus underlining social injustices in Sweden.

They describe their own present and future situations in positive terms. However, some respondents belong to households with two high-income earners, whereas in others only one person enjoys a high income. But even in the latter cases, they do not seem to face financial problems. For instance, Markus tells us he is the main earner in his family, as his wife works in the cultural sector. He compares his family with households with two high-income earners: “[s]ince my wife does not make any money, we might not be super rich if you compare us with other friends who have two incomes over say 51,000.” However, Markus tells us he has never felt any stress over money.

As the interviewees feel economically secure, they claim that the pursuit of new challenges in their careers motivates their decisions about their working lives to a greater extent than pay increases. For example, Daniel says his salary was not the main factor in the decision to make this change when he last switched from being a consultant to a less well-paid job in a state-owned company:

> It went down by 20,000, I think. But it feels totally okay, I thought. I wanted to do something different and thought I would join a new organisation. And I still thought that the salary I was getting was... I had no problems supporting myself.

After that move, he worked his way up and today he has a significantly higher salary than when he started. This is a recurring pattern when the interviewees talk about their future in the labour market. Another example comes from Stefan, who works in a large corporation:

> This might sound really strange, but at present it [economic reward] is not a driving force. No, the driving force is that the company I am working for is doing well and that the people who work there feel happy, as do the customers who come there to shop.

Similarly, Lars, who works in financial investment and is self-employed, says that a higher salary was not the reason he pursued the position he is currently in, and the salary is no longer an important factor for him: "After a while the salary does not become a criterion for jobs really at all, because it's good everywhere." Lars, who reports earning up to SEK 400,000 per month, which puts him among the top 1% income earners, adds that having financial margins means that in the event of being unemployed – which he sees as unlikely – he would be able to manage for at least half a year: "[a]bsolutely. It has been like that for probably [..] twenty years at least."

Another indication of the interviewees' feelings of economic security is that some are not union members. As already mentioned, in Sweden, trade union membership is more prevalent among white-collar than blue-collar workers. According to Statistics Sweden (2018b), employees (who had work as their main activity) (aged 16-64) with post- secondary education are more likely to be members of a trade union or employer organisation than those without: 74% compared to 54%. Rikard tells us that he is not worried about unemployment but he still wants to guarantee his income by being a member of a union: "[w]ell, the only reason I am a [union] member is actually that it [the membership] includes income insurance. Not because I think I'm going to become unemployed, but... yes, you sleep a little better at night."

Some respondents have chosen to be part of a union, not, presumably, because they need the membership to feel secure, because they already do. However, like Rikard, some interviewees still like to have that extra security, even though they do not think they will need it. Besides the fact that their current income provides them with a good standard of living, the security of having a well-paid job in the future also appears to be crucial to their feeling of economic security. They feel secure in being able to retain their current job, and in knowing that their education and work experience would enable them to find another equivalent job, if necessary.

Attitudes towards inequality and the welfare state

According to Svallfors (2012:2): "[a]ttitudes toward the welfare state and other public institutions should be seen as central components of social order, governance, and legitimacy of modern societies." As for support for the welfare state, Svallfors (2011) has shown that there were no major changes in Sweden between 1981 and 2010. This is also evident in data from annual national surveys carried out by the SOM Institute at Gothenburg University since 1986 (Nilsson 2019). However, support for the public sector has increased substantially since 2010. In 2017, there were twice as many who opposed cuts to the public sector as those in favour of a smaller public sector. As shown in previous research, people's views on the welfare policy in Sweden are closely linked to class, education and income (Svallfors 1989).

This pattern is visible in data on support for lowering income differences in society. According to a survey carried out in 2018, 63% of Swedes think it is a fairly good or a very good idea to lower income differences in society. The rate is significantly higher among people who have not completed compulsory education (79%) and lowest among those with a university degree or more (58%) (Wärnlöf-Bové 2019). Another study has shown that certain high-income earning professions, such as lawyers, economists, and civil engineers, support reducing the public sector and would like to see more privatisation (Brante et al. 2015).

ESS data shows that 44% of the top 10% (as opposed to 62% of the rest of the income distribution) support the claim that "for a fair society, differences in living standards should be small" and that there have been no major changes in these attitudes over time (ESS, 2008, 2012 and 2016). ESS data (2008, 2016) also shows that those who consider themselves as belonging to the top 10% of households agree with the claim: "[l]arge differences in income [are] acceptable to reward talents and efforts" to a greater extent than the rest. This is true in both 2008 and 2016. However, some minor changes over time are noticeable: in both groups, the proportion of "agree" responses diminished. In the interviews, there are different arguments about inequality. Interviewees on the left seem to think that reducing inequality in outcomes would be good for society, while several on the right argue that equality of opportunity is more important. Another view is that inequality is not bad in itself. Instead, the focus should be on the actual living standards of the very poorest in society.

In an ESS data-based study on age, class, and attitudes towards government responsibilities and income redistributions, Svallfors, Kulin and Schnabel (2012:179) find that for Denmark and Sweden: "[c]lass differences are substantially smaller in both countries in 2008 than they were in 2002. Support for redistributive policies increased in all classes in the two Scandinavian countries between 2006 and 2008, but increases more among the most sceptical – that is, among members of service class I."[17] Moreover, they (Ibid.:181) conclude: "[w]ith almost no exceptions, we find workers to be more supportive of extensive welfare policies than the self-employed and the high salariat."

The interviews seem to indicate relatively strong support for welfare policies in general, especially for free education (attitudes to education are further discussed below). In the sample, there are differences between those on the right and on the left in relation to three questions: are current levels of inequality a problem or, on the contrary, are they necessary or even positive? Should inequality be considered in absolute or relative terms – that is, should poverty and absolute living standards be the focus or is inequality a problem in itself? And lastly, should everyone be given equal opportunities or should society seek equality of outcomes?

There is a range of views among respondents on the left, between those who think economic inequality is problematic at the level it is today, to those who merely think it should not increase. An example of the former is Lars, who tells us income inequalities seem to make more of a difference in people's lives today than they used to:

> I was a high-income earner in the nineties. It feels like there was no major difference [then]. Now there is a much bigger difference, with all private insurance and healthcare companies and RUT stuff and ROT. Everything like that clearly favours, I think, those who earn a little more. I think society has become less equal.

Conversely, Johanna, who works as a civil servant, believes only that inequality should not grow beyond its current levels. She told us a 50% income tax should be the absolute maximum, thus setting a limit for income redistribution.

[17] Svallfors, Kulin and Schnabel (2012:169) explain their class categorisation as follows: "[w]e collapse the Erikson- Goldthorpe schema into six classes: unskilled workers, skilled workers, routine nonmanuals [sic], service class II, service class I, and the self-employed."

There are also those on the right who agree that inequality should be addressed. When asked about the causes of income inequality, Cristian mentions the increasing gap between income from wages and income from capital gains: "[a]s I understand it, there has never been a larger gap, not since the 1930s or something, and I don't think that's good." Several interviewees point to the negative consequences of inequality, including for the rich, as it contributes to more crime. Cristian, who voted for the liberal-conservative Moderate Party, told us high-income earners might ultimately be affected negatively by a large income gap: "[i]t creates friction. I think it creates a bad social climate. I imagine it creates crime. Everything like that. So, I definitely don't think it's good." As the interviewees discuss what society will be like in the future, several envisage a more fragmented one. Mats discusses the wealthy area he lives in, and predicts he might need more security measures than just surveillance cameras to protect his house in the future:

> I don't have fences here. It's not because I can't afford to build a fence, but it's because I don't have to. Now I have surrounded myself with lots, lots of cameras, it's because I need it. But I can give it twenty more years and you can be sure that I will live in an area with security guards.

In a similar vein, Daniel ponders what kind of country he thinks Sweden will be in ten years' time. He believes social stratification will be more pronounced and that it will be "even harder to find common projects for all segments of society" to rally around.

There are other interviewees on the right who do not think that a more equal society is necessarily inherently desirable. Henrik, who works in PR and communications, thinks this depends on what you mean by inequality:

> I really hope and do believe that it is possible in Sweden to come from Rinkeby [a marginalised neighbourhood in Stockholm] or something and become CEO of Ericsson. I really think it's special for those born today. And at the same time, I am not for any form of redistribution of income... wage adjustments between communities. [I]f you mean it would be more equal then, I wouldn't agree.

Henrik goes even further, and tells us he wants greater income differences: "[I] would benefit from it. Absolutely. And I think

society would benefit from it. Sweden would benefit from it." Henrik emphasises, however, that this should not mean that the most socially excluded should be worse off. He believes differences in society are not negative per se, as they can be a driving force. Having voted for the Centre Party in the last election, he believes it would be positive if Sweden became more unequal. He thinks that politicians are afraid to admit they want a society with larger economic gaps, and that they would find that many support larger inequalities: "[I]t is clear that, when almost half of the population vote for it, then it is a view that a large part of the population has." Henrik adds:

> It is really something that is frequently brought up, that the gaps in Sweden are becoming larger. But yes, it is obvious that they will be. The proposals that have been made by the last few governments, apart from the one that was [in office] just before, but even now again, yes, have been focused on tax cuts. This will lead to increased gaps.

Henrik, like other interviewees, seems to think society needs some level of inequality. Sebastian, when responding as to whether more equality is inherently desirable, claims: "it [society] should not be too bureaucratic or static either. There is a certain dynamic in that you have the opportunity to distinguish yourself from others. It is a driving force too, so [some inequality] is okay." Other interviewees, especially on the right, like Amanda, think along similar lines. For her, one of the most important aspects of inequality is that it contributes to other problems such as "exclusion" and "segregation" that cause everyone to lose out. But ultimately, for her, inequality is not really the problem:

> It [inequality] is completely uninteresting; people can make a billion if they want. If they pay 65 % of it in tax, then we should be damn happy that there are Swedish companies that bring in a lot of taxable money to Sweden.

In Amanda's opinion, high entry wages, which she believes many trade unions have negotiated in recent years, contribute to inequality. She thinks these wage agreements keep many people outside the labour market: "because of this, society has been torn apart. And I wonder if the trade union movement understands this." However, Amanda, who runs a business with several employees but earns just above the 10% threshold, does not see inequality as bad

in itself, putting an emphasis instead on avoiding social exclusion and absolute poverty: “[s]ociety must have a minimum level that is acceptable." Among our interviewees, there are those who believe inequality can incentivise people to improve their situation – those who think poverty is the problem rather than inequality. Others, meanwhile, see inequality itself as a problem because it affects people's living conditions. For instance, Jenny, a programmer, notes that society is built on injustice: “no one can be rich if no one is poor, because it is a relative concept.”

As mentioned in the introduction, Sweden has experienced a rapid increase in inequality in the past few decades (OECD 2015). When it comes to explaining why, there are some common themes among the interviews. First, there are those who describe increasing inequality as a consequence of political decisions. The interviewees on the left, and some on the right, discuss how the impact of neo-liberal reforms of the welfare state has transformed society. Among others on the right, this development is not described as purely negative. Second, some interviewees associate inequality with increased individualisation, an explanation which is based on their comparison with previous decades. The third dimension of the interviewees’ views and attitudes on inequality, discussed previously, namely whether everyone should be given equal opportunities or equal rights, can be illustrated by the interviewees’ concerns about the deterioration of the education system.

As previously mentioned, the respondents agree on the importance of the education system regardless of their party political views. They consider it the welfare state’s responsibility to provide everyone with free access to good quality education. According to previous research (Martinsson and Weissenbilder 2017), highly educated and high-income earners regard the school system as one of the most pressing societal problems. In addition, the education system is also the facet of the welfare state that the interviewees themselves have most benefitted from, as, for instance, Lars emphasises. In addition to the education system, Lars also mentions the low cost of pre-schools as an important part of the Swedish welfare system, as the low cost enables both parents to work, and he compares this with the high cost of childcare in the UK. Carl, a lawyer, also highlights how the education system can contribute to equality. He uses as an example a project in a marginalised area for which he volunteers through work – talking with secondary school pupils:

> […] I told them "it's free to have an education like mine. It doesn't cost any money. […] If you work hard, you get good grades and then put an effort into making the most of your education, then you can get this. You get it for free." And I don't know what an education like mine costs, it's quite an inexpensive education but let's say it still costs a couple of hundred thousand, so the state will provide you with that, and afterwards you will work and pay taxes.

Carl believes that in Sweden, it is possible to work hard, make an effort, and be rewarded for it. For those like Carl, who highlight the importance of equal opportunities, it is central that everyone gets the same chance to develop their potential.

The respondents' focus on the education system is not that surprising. Previous research (Svallfors 1989) has found that higher grade professionals and the highly educated generally want to spend more on education and, indeed, the majority of the interviewees are highly educated and have benefitted from free education.

The interviewees also agree that primary and secondary schools have undergone negative changes and are more strongly segregated by class than before. An example comes from Stefan, who votes for the Moderate Party:

> I am not that excited about charter schools, for example. I think that you should go to school in your neighbourhood with your friends and that it should create the same opportunities for everyone there [...]; the protected schooling that we had in the 1970s, compared to what those born in the 1990s and in 2000s have... It is quite a big difference.

Several interviewees seem to think that the school system has failed to meet the needs of some groups, such as migrants and working-class children, and this failure has increased knowledge-gaps between different groups. Erika is one of the interviewees who argues that Sweden has "become a more unequal society" with reference to the education system:

> I think the way in which the school system has developed, and above all, perhaps, with charter schools, where it is very obvious […] that some [parents] know how to navigate the system and others don't know. So, it becomes like informal inequality.

Erika is concerned about increasing levels of inequality and about charter schools contributing to inequality and ethnic segregation. In such accounts, the education system is seen as both having the potential to make Sweden more equal and to contribute to inequality – especially in its current form through privately-run charter schools.

Most interviewees do not feel that growing inequality is positive, even for the very wealthiest. As already mentioned, some are concerned that large inequalities could lead to rising crime rates. One interviewee also says that the rich will have to protect themselves in gated communities in the future. Several interviewees also believe that the education system has deteriorated. They associate inequality in education primarily with the existence of private charter schools. The fact that Swedish schools are administered by municipalities, which spend varying amounts on education, is also seen as contributing to inequalities. Some believe that possible solutions include the central state being in charge of schools and improved dissemination of information on access to higher education.

Historically, education played an important role in the construction of the Swedish welfare state (Nyström 2012). As Nyström points out, education policies in Sweden have historically been central to the welfare state project. Tackling stratification based on class and gender was traditionally regarded as an important function of the education system. Despite this, education has remained a stratifying factor in Sweden, for instance in relation to access to tertiary studies for those from working-class backgrounds (Kahlroth 2019). Even though the education system has never been equal, inequalities have noticeably increased. Nyström (2012:52) describes this as a consequence of political reforms: "[i]n the rear-view mirror, it is clear that the reforms of the 1990s seem to have increased the importance of pupils' class backgrounds, at the individual level and, to an even greater extent, at school level."[18] At the same time, prestigious publicly-run schools are increasingly attractive to upper-middle class children (Lidegran 2018).

[18] Our translation.

Taxation and social responsibility

Sweden's tax-to-GDP ratio has decreased dramatically since the year 2000, from 49% to 44%, but is still one of the highest within the OECD. The OECD average tax-to-GDP ratio is 34.2 % (2017, see OECD 2019a). Compared to other OECD countries, Sweden also has a much higher tax revenue on personal income.

Proportionally higher payroll taxes also contribute to the decrease in individuals' disposable income in Sweden compared to other OECD countries (OECD 2019b). As shown by previous research (Edlund 1999), there is relatively strong support for progressive taxation in Sweden. However, Edlund (Ibid.:120) notes that "those with lower service class occupations and the self-employed are less supportive. The 'deviant' case of the higher service class may be noticed." In recent years, the Swedish tax system has become less progressive. In addition, as shown by Bastani and Waldenström (2019), university education is strongly positively correlated with support for almost all forms of taxation. However, the top 10% high-income earners seem to hold more negative attitudes towards inheritance and wealth taxes, and especially state income tax. According to Bastani and Waldenström (2019), the explanation for their negative attitudes towards state income tax could be that it is high-income earners who pay this tax.

Some interviewees believe that the tax system needs reforming, especially income and corporation tax as these benefit those at the very top. There is a pattern among the interviewees: they talk about the importance of financing welfare services through taxes rather than charity. This is something that everyone seems to agree on, no matter where they are on the political scale. Several interviewees told us they are in favour of redistributive policies. Concerning the progressivity of the tax system, Sebastian said: "[t]here is a difference between me and, I would say, the top… those who earn a lot of money. So, I pay the top tax rate, which I understand. And it feels a little unfair." He also believes that it is reasonable that high-income earners pay more in taxes: "Yes, yes, yes. I do not like my tax rate. I just think I am not at the top of the pyramid yet. I think it [the tax rate] could be much higher."

The interviewees also point out that some taxes should be reformed. Although the tax system benefits Cristian, as a partner in a law-firm, he is nevertheless critical of it as he believes that tax reform would help deal with mounting inequalities:

> Yes, I think taxation is a good practice. If you do it right. Personally, as a high-income earner, I sometimes think it works in a rather questionable way. After all, there are quite a few people who become high-income earners and I think it hits the middle class and upper-middle class unfairly, maybe. While the extremely… rich if you may call them that, or the corporate taxes… and the companies have it way much easier.

At the same time, Cristian says the tax system disadvantages other parts of the middle class. He believes it could be reformed: that is, that the largest companies could pay considerably more tax than they do now, and that such changes could help reduce inequality. Another example comes from Nils: "[i] think it should pay off to work […] it is a little strange that you pay more tax on salary than you do on stock profits." Taking into account that our interviewees are high-income earners who derive most of their earnings from employment, it is not surprising that the taxation of income is seen by several as being too high.

The interviewees also discuss other taxes. Cristian draws attention to the fact that abolition of inheritance tax has contributed to wealth building up in a way that allows those he calls the "aristocracy" to transfer assets over generations. In seeming to benefit those who already have assets, he likens Sweden's tax system to that of the United States, which goes against the image of the country as a pioneer of equality (See Nyström 2012; Pred 2000). Indeed, many interviewees think high-income earners should pay higher taxes; some even believe they should pay higher rates than they do today. Some are critical of income tax levels, either because they are too high or too low. One example of the former is Henrik. He thinks tax levels in Sweden "could probably be lower" and would like to see reform of state income tax, municipal income tax and the additional state income tax.[19] Several interviewees, such as Maja, feel that the tax on capital should be higher:

> If you earn more, you should pay higher taxes. I think that you should… invest more in structures that benefit everyone. It doesn't get better just because high-income earners earn more and can […] give their loved ones good healthcare or good education. That does not serve the system or the community.

[19] Additional state income tax was abolished in January 2020.

Like Maja, several interviewees told us they think that those who earn more should contribute more; some even say they enjoy paying taxes. Sebastian says that one of the most important ways to achieve solidarity is to ensure that taxes that should be paid are paid, and that "there is no tax evasion or Panama papers stuff, to show those who may feel they are at the bottom [...], that yes... the state actually goes after the rich." For Sebastian, it is important that the state acts against tax evasion. On a similar note, Cristian comments:

> I think people who work a lot, no matter what they do, as employees for a company or… must have the opportunity to create a small fortune as well. And I think that is difficult today, actually, for most of us. Even if you earn a lot it is not like you can save and have a million in the bank. But on the other hand, I think that those who are in the top layer earn a disproportionate amount.

Cristian tells us that he also thinks that there should be more focus on corporate tax. A noticeable pattern is that some interviewees tend to perceive the tax burden on income as too heavy.

Taking a closer look at the interviewees' views on the social responsibility of high-income earners, it is noticeable that some say they automatically take responsibility by paying taxes – an interesting example is Annika who consents to paying high taxes and thinks that she is automatically fulfilling her social responsibility in doing so. Beyond that, she does not feel she has any other responsibility. Furthermore, she believes everyone has a responsibility, and high-income earners are not special in this respect: "[n]o, I think everyone has equal responsibility."

When asked if high-income earners have a special responsibility to contribute to society, Carl conveys a similar point of view:

> [...] One contributes to a great extent by paying a larger share of tax. If I get a wage increase now, then it benefits the welfare state as well. The welfare state earns more from it than I do, and the social services that I use are the same as they were before. In a way, I think that you contribute more. A special responsibility... No, I don't think so.

Helena also believes that high-income earners have a responsibility to pay taxes:

> [Y]es, I'm not doing tax planning. I don´t do things like that to try to get away from paying tax. I have sold my home with a good profit, and I am not complaining at all that there will be tax on the profit. In turn, I have received interest rate tax deductions on my mortgage.

Helena, like other interviewees, believes high-income earners should not “complain” about high taxes. However, others think high-income earners have a responsibility, beyond paying taxes, as they wield considerable power over the direction that society takes. For instance, Nils argues that high-income earners have additional responsibility "because it [being a high-income earner] is often linked to greater influence, perhaps. In some places at least." And Lars tells us: "[a]s a privileged [person] in society, you have to start taking more responsibility.” Similarly, Markus describes high-income earners as having a particular responsibility: "[y]ou usually have more power and are able to influence the development of society.” However, Markus has the view that high-income earners mainly have right-wing opinions and, in order to improve society, he argues they “must drop their individualism and think more collectively.”

In sum, most interviewees seem to agree that taxes are a good way to redistribute economic resources. Nevertheless, some see themselves as disadvantaged because of Swedish taxation’s focus on income, rather than on capital or wealth. To understand our interviewees' views on different taxes, it is important to remember that almost every one of them relies on a salary as their main source of income. They describe people who also have financial resources in the form of capital income or inherited wealth as the economic elite, and place that elite above themselves.

Political participation and civic engagement

There is a tendency for the top 10% to be somewhat more interested in politics than the remaining 90% of the income distribution. We can see that 71% of the top 10% are very or quite interested in politics, compared to 64% of the rest of the population (ESS 2016). However, a large majority have not volunteered or been involved in politics in the past year. This applies to both groups. There are no significant differences between the top 10%

and the rest of the population. No trends can be seen over time (ESS 2008, 2012 and 2016).

As shown in previous studies (e.g., Olofsson 2018), high-income earners are more likely to vote than the rest. As far as class voting in Sweden is concerned, it is known from previous research (Oskarson 2010; Vestin and Oskarson 2017) that class is significant for party sympathies – public officials and entrepreneurs tend to sympathise with parties on the right while blue-collar and lower level white-collar workers tend to vote for the left. However, in recent decades there has been a decline in class voting in Sweden (Vestin and Oskarson 2017; Vestin 2019).

The fact that high-income earners seem to have an interest in politics is also reflected in the interviews. However, only a few have ever worked or volunteered for a political party or organisation. The most common reasons they give for not wanting to get involved include that it is time-consuming; that they regard political work as boring; or they do not share the groupthink they associate with political parties.

The political context in which the interviews were conducted was that of an unusually difficult process (for Sweden) of forming a government when the 2018 general election ended in deadlock. None of the traditional political blocks managed to secure the 175 seats needed to form a coalition because none of them – or any of the parties for that matter – were willing to form a government that would be dependent upon support from the far-right party, the Sweden Democrats. The other political parties' approach to the Sweden Democrats has dominated Swedish politics since they first entered parliament in 2010. After three months of negotiations, the Social Democrats and the Green Party formed a minority government based on support from the Liberal and the Centre Party through the so-called "January Agreement" signed in 2019 by the Social Democrats, the Centre Party, the Liberals and the Green Party.

Respondents were asked why they voted as they did in the last election. Jenny explains:

> I personally have such a good life that I may not have to vote. I don't have to worry. No matter who wins, it won't make much difference to me. I will still be able to go to work and drive my car if I want. But then I can instead vote for someone who is worse off.

Jenny tells us that she does not primarily vote out of self-interest. As a high-income earner, she can live her life as usual no

matter what political party is in power. Instead, she wants to use her voice to improve the lives of those in a less fortunate position.

Indeed, several interviewees actively reject the Sweden Democrats, regardless of where they are on the political spectrum. For example, Susann states that she voted for the Social Democrats because she did not want the Sweden Democrats to gain more power. The exception to this is Mats. He is the only interviewee who voted for the Sweden Democrats in the 2018 election, and also in 2014. The SOM Institute has shown that the Sweden Democrats had weak support among high-income earners in the 2014 election (Sannerstedt 2016:172). This was true also in 2018. When compared to Social Democrat voters, a recent study shows that Sweden Democrats voters have roughly the same income distribution, though it is little more common for Sweden Democrat voters to have a very high income (over SEK 70,000 per month) (Jylhä, Rydgren and Strimling 2019). Mats says his decision to vote for the Sweden Democrats was for "purely strategic reasons" and explains:

> It is only in this way [by voting for the Sweden Democrats] that you can force the Social Democrats in a healthy direction. The Social Democrats, [forming a coalition] together with the Green Party, that has been the most dangerous thing we have done. That is, when we brought in the Green Party [into government] and let the Green Party have an influence on migration policy, then we entered into the extreme completely.

Mats explains his voting for the Sweden Democrats by referring to earlier migration policies; a change in a liberal direction that was largely driven by the Green Party who were in a government coalition with the Social Democrats from 2014. However, it should be noted that the Social Democrats' migration policies have changed dramatically in the other direction since the refugee situation at the end of 2015. Mats' views could also be understood in light of what existing research tells us about the position of the elite, that is, as Khan, (2016:9) puts it: "'populist' ethno-nationalist movements" appeal to "some sub-set of élites".

Mats is an exception; most other interviewees think the Sweden Democrats must be curtailed. Annika is one interviewee who flagged migration as important, and has both voted for and been active in the Social Democrats. However, after the restrictive migration agreement the party made with the right and the Green Party, she says that she can no longer vote for them. However, some

believe it is dangerous to exclude them from negotiations and coalitions. For instance, Peter says he has no time to spare for the Sweden Democrats, but he does not think it is right to isolate them politically, which happened after the last parliamentary election:

> They must be let in and then you have to debate, and make visible, the downside of their way of thinking. By shutting them out, it becomes like Germany in the 1930s, they become martyrs and there will be more and more people who think "[y]es, but we just want to bring about a change" and do not care what change.

In the latest parliamentary election, Amanda voted for the Moderate Party, and not for the Sweden Democrats, but believes that "it is not democratic" to exclude a party, the way the Sweden Democrats have been excluded from political negotiations and coalitions since they entered parliament for the first time in 2010.

It is worth noting that some interviewees are swing voters: they view both left and right parties as viable alternatives. The voting behaviour of some interviewees can be understood through the GAL-TAN scale used to describe different sides of the political spectrum.[20] Some interviewees, like Stefan, express political views that can be associated with the left, yet vote for parties on the right. Others, like Rikard and Annika, most often vote for parties associated with the left but have considered voting for the Centre Party, at times for reasons related to gender representation. Annika tells us:

> Even though I vote for Fi [Feminist Initiative] [laughter], I'm not that far from Centre politics either. And I would like to have a female prime minister. So yes, I thought [...] I could vote for Annie Lööf [the leader of the Centre Party].

Few interviewees have ever worked for a political organisation, even though some respondents have been local politicians and one is a politically appointed full-time official. In addition to Annika, also Mats has been active in the Social Democrats. Others have worked for specific political campaigns. Cristian, for example, was part of the campaign for Sweden to join the Economic and Monetary Union, where he did paid work in the campaign for a "yes" vote. As mentioned earlier, all interviewees but one vote in

[20] *GAL* stands for green, alternative, and libertarian, while *TAN* stands for traditional, authoritarian and nationalist.

general elections, though few of them are or have been active in a political party. It is also worth noting that the interviewees are often critical of the content and direction of current policy, though not necessarily of the political system per se. While a majority of the interviewees are not interested in becoming politically active, this does not seem to be due to a feeling of distance from politics. Rather, they believe engaging with political parties is boring and time-consuming. Erika adds that she would have difficulty aligning herself with a party, and similarly Peter refuses to have to share a way of thinking with a political party: "[i]t becomes conformist and it becomes simplistic. No, I don't think it's good. I really like people to have complete freedom of choice. I don't like groupings."

However, there are exceptions, such as Cristian. He tells us that he thinks it would be fun to be politically active, but he does not think he has time to fully contribute. Although several interviewees seem reluctant to become active in a political party, some engage in broader political commitments. Those who are – or are considering becoming – involved politically, have three main areas of interest: migration, immigrant integration, and the environment. Concerning the latter, it is clear that these interviewees consider environmental issues important, but few of them are actively involved. Those who are, donate or have donated money to Greenpeace, while others, such as Peter, describe their reason for working professionally with environmental issues as a way of contributing.

In contrast, several interviewees are involved in integration projects, and it is striking how many of the interviewees seem to equate civic engagement with working with immigrants. None of our respondents mentioned doing charity work for poor non-immigrants, such as contributing to food banks or volunteering at shelters for homeless people. The impression is that social marginalisation and vulnerability – social injustice – primarily affect immigrants. Some respondents help migrants through their work; others join and meet people through different kinds of integration projects; one works for a network offering practical support to refused asylum-seekers. Rikard, with a background of being active in his student union, highlights the environment and integration as political issues that are important to him. He argues that to achieve the latter, it is important that newly arrived immigrants join the labour market – which is often discussed in Swedish public debate. Rikard is careful to add: "[y]ou should not see the group itself as a problem. You should see it as an opportunity."

Other respondents have also tried to get involved in projects integrating migrants. Through work, Carl volunteered for a project in a marginalised area of Stockholm and contrasts it with the inner-city district where he lives. He describes being affected by meeting young people and how they are forced to take responsibility for their parents' situations:

> Now, just sitting here in Södermalm and moving in my own circles… It was an eye-opener to come out to [a marginalised area in Stockholm] and meet eighth-graders and see what... what it's like there. And it touched me profoundly. When there was a young guy who said "yes, I must explain how the political system works for my mother". And it is such a huge responsibility when it is a 15-year-old guy.

Carl became more aware of people's unequal chances in Sweden by leaving his own neighbourhood and social circles, and meeting young people in different socio-economic circumstances. He felt that one possible way to make a difference was to inform young people, through face-to-face interactions, about the opportunities that exist elsewhere in society. Other interviewees tell us that they are active in – or are thinking about becoming involved in – integration initiatives. For instance, Stefan tells us that he would consider getting involved in "creating possibilities for young people and newcomers". Helena, a soon-to-retire professor, tells us that the integration of refugees is an area she might get involved in. She says that she might invite a refugee for dinner with her friends. She tells us that rather than inviting a Roma asking for money outside her nearest grocery store, she would invite "[a]cademics from Syria, who are very similar to us in many ways. [pause] Unfortunately, I must admit to having such preferences in this case." Helena has a self-critical tone when she adds that she thinks that she would prefer inviting refugees who, like herself, are highly educated. Helena is also active in a charity project for an orphanage in the global south.

Those interviewees highly critical of the Sweden Democrats also defend those who signed the January Agreement, one aim of which was to enable the Social Democrats and the Green Party to stay in power, and keep the Sweden Democrats out after the 2018 general election. The agreement is beneficial for high-income earners, with tax cuts for their income band on the political agenda. Nevertheless, some interviewees considered the agreement problematic, as it would lead to compromised and blurred party boundaries, which in

turn would make voters lose confidence in the political system.

Erika is one respondent who, concerned at the possibility of the political situation shifting, given the emerging anti-democratic right-wing politics in Europe, is considering becoming more politically engaged. Erika defines herself as left-wing and has been active in student politics and involved with ATTAC, an international network critical of neo-liberal globalisation that campaigns for the regulation of financial markets. Erika is currently engaged in asylum issues. She says she might become more politically engaged if the situation changes:

> […] Imagine that we would end up in a situation like Poland, Hungary […]. I think I would be a lot more committed if I felt that very important rights like... Then maybe you would be forced... Yes, that there would be an even more polarised position. The fact that I am active in the asylum committee is pretty much a reaction to the fact that I think it has become like that.

While Erika tells us that she is involved in asylum issues because of her concern at the growth of right wing nationalism in Europe, including Sweden, she points out that she does not engage with political parties. Carl feels it is important to make sure that European cooperation will not be undermined by authoritarian right-wing forces and talks about some integration projects he is considering getting involved with. Having previously emphasised the importance of education, he tells us that he has donated money to sports projects in marginalised areas. This accords with the importance other interviewees attach to integration – an issue for which there is an appetite for engagement.

Within the interview data, there are three identifiable trends in respondents' involvement in politics and the third sector. First, the interviewees (with one exception) vote, and seem to attach great importance to participating in elections. Second, even though they have a genuine interest in politics – and several have a pronounced political ideology – most (although there are exceptions) are not active in any political organisation. Third, when it comes to their involvement in civil society and the third sector, many express ambivalence about charity. While sceptical, they have made a pragmatic decision to continue to donate money – mainly to large established organisations such as the Red Cross, Greenpeace, Save the Children, and Médecins Sans Frontières – but do not view charity as a long-term solution. This can be understood in relation

to the recent history of Sweden; the state, rather than non-profit organisations, is seen as responsible for providing support to those who need it. The interviews do not show any political difference in attitudes to this between those on the right or the left. Even the former agree that it is primarily the state that should take responsibility for people living in poverty.

Conclusion

It is striking that, regardless of whether the interviewees are on the left or right of the political spectrum, most believe that the education system is one of the most important institutions through which equality can be achieved. In Sweden, investment in education intensified during the "golden years" of the welfare state – creating universal access to pre-school and introducing universal grants and subsiding student credits for higher education – in an effort to elevate the whole of the working class (see Sohl 2018a). However, following neo-liberal reforms to the welfare state, upward mobility came to be understood as the responsibility of individuals: it was up to them to improve their own life conditions. This is reflected in the respondents' narratives. On the one hand, they stress the importance of a universal education system, as the main mechanism for upward mobility. This accords with the fact that, as mentioned earlier, the majority of respondents have a university degree. On the other hand, they also point to their own agency and individual efforts as decisive for their position on the income scale. It is evident that Swedish high-income earners do not worry about money and mostly feel secure about their economic position, but not about that of society as a whole. According to ESS data (2016), very few high-income earners in Sweden claim to face some difficulty in making ends meet. According to the ESS, the top 10% felt safer in 2016 than in 2008; suggesting that the 2008 financial crisis did not significantly affect them.

Their feeling of economic security is tied to their access to stable employment and good labour market opportunities. For instance, some are not members of a trade union, and do not seem to be worried about becoming unemployed.

The interviewees strongly support the welfare state. They also put the primary responsibility for reducing inequality on the state, regardless of whether they are on the right or left of the political spectrum. Our interviews indicate that, besides paying their taxes,

the majority do not think high-income earners have a particular responsibility for addressing inequality.

The interviewees' views on inequality differ. Some describe large inequalities as negative, both for those at the bottom and at the top; others see inequality as necessary or positive. Several interviewees voice concerns about growing inequalities in the education system due to school segregation. The interviewees also seem to understand poverty as an issue of integration.

Although not unanimous, there is support among most interviewees for taxation as a redistributive mechanism. This is interesting in the light of public debates about taxes being too high, particularly for high-income earners. Nevertheless, some respondents argue that the tax system needs reform, flagging up that reform of corporate and asset taxes (including inheritance tax) is needed because such taxes currently benefit those at the top. Several believe tax evasion is morally wrong and a problem that needs to be addressed. It is important to note that high-income earners are especially affected by taxes on income. Some believe that their taxes should be even higher and more progressive, while others think taxes in general should be lower, arguing that if people retain more of their income it would incentivise them to work harder.

Previous studies (e.g., Olofsson 2018) have found that high-income earners are more likely to vote than the rest. Several respondents have an interest in politics and hold strong political views. However, few have worked or campaigned for a political organisation or party. Previous research (e.g., Oskarson 2010; Vestin and Oskarson 2017) has shown that class is significant for party sympathies, even though there has been a decline in class voting in Sweden in recent decades (Vestin and Oskarson 2017; Vestin 2019). Today, the GAL-TAN scale is often used to describe new political dividing lines. For most of our respondents, however, a traditional right-left scale seems to explain the interviewees' values and attitudes: those who favour increased redistribution through higher taxes place themselves to the left, and vice versa. They clearly reject xenophobic parties and right-wing populism, except for one interviewee who voted for the Sweden Democrats. Several interviewees express political attitudes and values that tend to be more left-wing than indicated by the voting behaviour of high-income earners as a group. Strikingly, some interviewees tend to express left-wing attitudes and believe taxes are a good way to redistribute economic resources, even if they vote for political parties on the right.

It is clear that most interviewees regard meritocracy as a key characteristic of a fair society. Hence, they emphasise the importance of the education system in achieving upward mobility. Why are narratives about upward mobility so powerful? One answer is that such narratives “fit in with the national 'success story'” (Sohl 2014:467) of the Swedish welfare state. Social mobility is also often equated with equality and social justice. However, some interviewees acknowledge that there are limitations to what individual effort and hard work can achieve. They point out that having an immigrant background is an impediment to upward mobility, and that this is exacerbated by housing and educational segregation. Several also identify class-related injustices that impede people’s life chances, pointing out that those in working-class occupations are often not proportionately rewarded for their work. In general, the interviewees stress the connection between success and hard work, even though some acknowledge that people in working-class jobs often work hard without being fairly paid.

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