In short, historiographic reflections have been penalized by a kind of personality cult, even if reversed in the case of Palme's opponents.[1]

1. Literature on Olof Palme

His spectacular political career, on the one side, and his tragic end, on the other side, have nourished – already when Palme was still alive – a thriving and deplorable literary genre made up of speculations on his demoniac nature, his crimes, or at best his inadequacies;[2] as well as conspiracy theories of all kinds and hundreds hypothesis on the murder.[3] . In the end of the 1980s the first biography came out, written by the journalist Björn Elmbrant:[4] it is still an unavoidable reference. It was followed later by the purely political biography written by the journalist Peter Antman and by the Social Democratic politician Pierre Schori,[5] who was State Secretary for Foreign Affairs in the second Palme government. Collective volumes[6] followed too, including contributions that focused on particular aspects of Palme's politics/policies (first and foremost the foreign one)[7], and memoirs by representatives of the Social Democratic Party.[8]

Due partly to the awareness that much was left to be studied with regards to Palme's life and political role, and partly to the approaching 25th anniversary of his tragic death, recent years have witnessed a renewed biographic effort, thanks first of all to the monumental work (nearly 900 pages) by Kjell Östberg, a historian who has devoted great part of his scientific production to social movements and to the relationship between intellectuals and politics. One could wonder what was left to be said about Palme after this two-volume biography, published between 2008 (1. *I takt med tiden. Olof Palme 1927-1969* – Behind the times. Olof Palme 1927-1969[9]) and 2009 (2. *När vinden vände. Olof Palme 1969-1986* – When the wind turned. Olof Palme 1969-1986[10]). Nevertheless, in 2010 two more works were published: the short *Palme*, by Klas Eklund,[11] who was one of the economic advisors of the second Palme government; and the impressive (more than 700 pages) *Underbara dagar framför oss. En biografi över Olof Palme* (Wonderful Days in Front of Us. A biography

of Olof Palme)[12] by Henrik Berggren, historian but above all leading writer of “Dagens Nyheter”, the most influential Swedish newspaper, which typically endorses “independent liberal” stances.

The aim of this article is not to review the last three biographies mentioned above, but to try to identify their methodology, so to speak, then singling out – in a way which may come across as arbitrary – some of the controversial points in Palme’s political career (leaving out both scandals and vulgar attacks), as they will prove to be good opportunities for comparing the interpretations given by their authors.[13]

2. Different ways to tell a life

Eklund’s book differs from the other two works for it is part of a series devoted to the Swedish Prime Ministers in the last hundred years (i.e. from Karl Staaff to the present PM Fredrik Reinfeldt). Each volume is meant as a quick introduction to a specific PM, and in fact Eklund’s *Palme* is a fairly simple political biography (with only a limited attention to Palme’s private life). Nonetheless, its final section (*Arvet efter Palme*, Palme’s legacy) makes it different from a flat list of facts and dates. In a few pages, the author takes indeed a stock of Palme’s outcomes and failures and then even goes so far as to try to imagine what could happen if Palme had not been murdered — a kind of counterfactual history, in other words.

Östberg’s and Berggren’s biographies show at first glance a similar structure, not only due to their remarkable length, but also insofar as both aim at an in-depth reconstruction of Palme’s life and role, as well as of the world around him (i.e. 20th-century Sweden and international, history). The title of the first volume of Östberg’s biography, *Behind the Times*, summarizes very well the author’s starting point, as it is made clear in the *Introduction*: first of all, the idea that Palme went across several ages during which history turned more than once to a new direction; secondly, the acknowledgement that Palme showed an extraordinary talent for grasping the *Zeitgeist* and the changes affecting it, and therefore was in the best position for exerting an effective influence on what was going on.

Östberg's approach is not at all individualistic.[14] His biography is rather a history of Palme *within* the history of the Swedish labour movement and of its changing relationship with Capital, with a swinging from collaboration to conflict that took place exactly under Palme's political apex. That does not imply that Palme's individuality is sacrificed in the end, but rather that the dilemmas which he had to face and the choices which he made are understandable only in the view of the power relations between classes and of the pressures upon the labour movement and its organizations coming both from the Right and from the Left. That explains why the two volumes of Östberg's biography represent an imposing picture of 20th-century Swedish political and social history.

To sum up Berggren's work is a trickier task, because of a kind of paradox which somehow undermines it. The main perspective is definitely individualistic, with regards both to the methodology – Palme's behaviour (as a person and as a politician) is often, too often perhaps, interpreted from a psychological and philosophical point of view – and to the interpretation – Berggren portrays Palme, whom he states to have voted for in 1982 and 1985,[15] far more as a liberal than as a socialist. On the other hand, it is exactly Palme who disappears eventually in the demanding history of Swedish culture and, in a way, Swedish civilisation in the 20th century, which constitutes the actual core of the book. Though fascinated by the gallery of poets, artists, film-makers, theorists and journalists – besides politicians – that Berggren recalls and outlines with great skill, the reader can not help wondering: "where has Palme gone?"

3. "Class treason"

One of the more investigated turning points in Palme's life are the reasons that led a talented offspring of one of the most influential families in Stockholm to join the Social Democratic Party (SAP) in 1951 – after drawing attention to himself as student leader on an international scale –, only to be appointed two years later as secretary of the then prime minister, Tage Erlander, at the age of twenty-six years.

All three authors stress the formative impact on the young Palme – until then holder of the

conservative vision (even if with social and international openings) inherited from his family – of the journeys made around the USA (1948), Eastern Europe (1949) and Asia (1953). These experiences meant the dramatic discovery of a reality made up of misery and oppression.[16] All three authors refuse the common yet misleading explanations focusing on Palme's opportunism: a young man with his background could have chosen far more promising careers. Besides, that the Social Democratic Party, in power since 1932, would have kept its position until 1976 was something that no one in the beginning of the 1950s could expect. On the contrary, many took for granted the forthcoming end of the Social Democratic age, as the party, perhaps as a consequence of being so successful, seemed unable to renew itself.[17] Why the labour movement then?

Eklund puts forward the easiest explanation: Palme joined the SAP because of his ideology: anti-colonialist, reformist, anti-communist.[18]

Östberg's thesis is summarized in a few words in the very last page of the second volume, but his whole work illustrates it. Two were the driving forces which turned Palme into a Social Democrat: the awareness that the world was about to change – and that he was in the best position, with his talent and his social and intellectual network, to contribute to a new age – and what Palme himself called the "joy of politics";[19] a feeling, the latter, that evokes the portrait of the politician by vocation outlined by Max Weber:

> Politics is a strong and slow boring of hard boards. It takes both passion and perspective. Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth – that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible. But to do that a man must be a leader, and not only a leader but a hero as well, in a very sober sense of the word. And even those who are neither leaders nor heroes must arm themselves with that steadfastness of heart which can brave even the crumbling of all hopes. This is necessary right now, or else men will not be able to attain even that which is possible today. Only he has the calling for politics who is sure that he shall not crumble when the world from his point of view is too stupid or too base for what he wants to offer. Only he who in the face of all this can say "In spite of all!" has the calling for politics.[20]

As to Berggren, he argues that one could expect that Palme would choose a career in politics, due to his interest in social problems, as well as in journalism or research, due to

his strong liking for intellectual life; but in the former case, siding with the Right; while in the latter keeping a more distanced approach to the public debate. What Palme did was to combine these two alternatives by turning to political engagement in the ranks of the Social Democratic party. Palme's unexpected choice was therefore twofold, as both an active role in politics and even more so a left-wing position did not belong to his social background, even if Berggren often insists on the continuity between Olof and his grandfather, Sven, the founder of the family fortune, who advocated social reforms.[21] It is noteworthy that Palme's *political* radicalism and the reformism that both Eklund and Östberg point out as one of Palme's main features (with Östberg referring to it in a double meaning: the awareness that reforms were needed and the talent for bringing forth reforms), are kept in the shade in Berggren's work. Yet, what comes in the spotlight is an overall attitude of cultural radicalism that, in Sweden, is traditionally associated with the Liberal party.

4. Radicalism abroad and compromise at home?

One could be tempted to wonder whether the biographers' conclusions as to Palme's joining the labour movement have influenced their interpretation of his politics as a whole; or whether on the contrary the opinions on Palme's place in Swedish history, developed at the end of their works, have favoured a retrospective reading of Palme's first controversial step, that is to say, "going over to the enemy", as his decision was perceived by many of his class peers. Whatever the answer, it is most interesting to see what kind of connection is established in the three biographies between the talented upper-class young man who committed himself to the struggle for the labour movement and the worldwide-known politician who displayed his radicalism in foreign affairs and was nevertheless inclined to compromise in domestic politics, both with the opposition parties and with the business community. What the biographers face here is the debate about Palme's position within the party, and his role within the history of Swedish Social Democracy as a whole.

4.a Foreign policy

Palme's radicalism in foreign policy has been related above all to his firm condemnation of the Vietnam War, which created considerable troubles to Sweden in its diplomatic relations with the USA. This was an irony of fate, given that Palme has been defined by many — Östberg and Berggren among them[22] — as the most American among Swedish politicians, due to his education, his journeys and his contacts in the USA.

Palme expressed his contrariety to the American military intervention in Vietnam in a few well-known speeches and articles: the so-called "Gävle speech" delivered in 1965, when Palme was minister of Transport and Communication;[23] the speech held at the Vietnam demonstration on February 1968,[24] when Palme was minister of Education and Culture and marched close to the North-Vietnamese ambassador in Moscow – and the picture came out in hundreds of newspapers all over the world; the article on *Song My* (a Vietnamese village destroyed by 19-20 years-old US soldiers) published in 1970,[25] when he was already prime minister; and finally *Hanoi, Christmas 1972*, a speech broadcast on the Swedish Radio and which is worth being quoted:

> We should call things by their proper names. What is going on in Vietnam today is a form of torture.
>
> There cannot be any military justification for the bombings […].
>
> People are being punished, a nation is being punished in order to humiliate it, to force it to submit to force.
>
> That's why the bombings are despicable.
>
> Many such atrocities have been perpetrated in recent history. They are often associated with a name: Guernica, Oradour, Babi Yar, Katyn, Lidice, Sharpeville, Treblinka.
>
> Violence triumphed. But posterity has condemned the perpetrators.
>
> Now a new name will be added to the list: Hanoi, Christmas 1972.[26]

Östberg presents the reader with the diverse reactions raised by Palme's statements. For most of his party fellows his engagement on such an issue not only was absolutely sincere, but also in line with the labour movement tradition of internationalism; right-wing representatives complained his home (ab)use of foreign policy, aiming at opposing the growing influence on social movements gained by the New Left in the 1960s; others have seen in his position a sign of his opportunism and careerism: he benefitted from the solidarity movement with the Vietnamese people and strengthened his position within the party and/or consolidated his reputation as international politician.[27]

Eklund maintains that thanks to Palme's Gävle speech "it became legitimate to criticize the USA", and that his statements shifted the whole Swedish debate on international affairs to the Left. At the same time, he notes that the Vietnam issue strengthened Palme's political identity, anointing him once and for all as an icon of the new time; because of his age (38 when the War started), no one among the Social Democratic representatives was more suitable than him to undertake the task of competing with the New Left for the "hegemony" on the new social movements.[28] Berggren shares this analysis, emphasizing furthermore Palme's skill in awaking a kind of national feeling, a sense of honour which moved a little country like Sweden to express its indignation in an unusually plain language. The words "Swedish neutrality" – which under the Second World War had got a quite bitter taste – came to be related to the solidarity with the struggle for independence of Third World nations. That is why Berggren refers even to a paradigm shift, as Palme introduced an interpretation of what was going on in Vietnam which challenged the one up to then prevailing, i.e. that the USA fought always and only for democracy, yet without embracing a Communist perspective.[29]

The home impact of the debate on the Vietnam War is also the focus of Östberg's chapter *Vietnam!*.

The starting point whereby to explain Palme's behaviour is the same, i.e. the Social Democrats' awareness that they were in danger to lose support from the Left, and that the person in the best position to try to resist that trend was Palme, whose anti-communism was well-tested. Unlike Eklund and Berggren however, Östberg is more sceptical about the outcomes of this strategy: if Palme succeed in keeping the party together around the Vietnam issue, the SAP lost nevertheless the battle for the hegemony on the Vietnam

movement. It was not devoid of significance that business – including trade of military technology – and intelligence relations between Sweden and the USA were not affected by the turbulence roused by Palme's vehemence, and that did not increase the SAP's credibility among the New Left activists. Östberg's conclusion is that the Vietnam War did not ruin at all Palme's attachment to US liberalism, with its belief that the best way to resist Communism was to gain influence on radical social movements. But Palme was in no way a pure pawn in the party's hands (as Eklund and Berggren, too, acknowledge); he did not hesitate to make statements that in few hours could compromise years of careful diplomatic relations. It was not Palme to create the Vietnam issue; but his role in putting it on the agenda can not be underestimated.[30]

On the occasion of the Portuguese Revolution (1974) some of the core values in Palme's view of international affairs came again in the light, according to Östberg: colonialism *vs* liberation struggles, poor countries *vs* rich ones, democracy *vs* fascism as well as communism, great powers *vs* small States. In the neutralization of the pressures aiming at questioning the Western Order, the Socialist International played a crucial role, and Palme, thanks to the influential example of his country, was in the forefront – in his own way: not by clash but by dialogue, favouring a reformist outcome of the Portuguese revolutionary phase.[31] Eklund discusses shortly the event, by writing that Palme contributed to avert the danger of a too radical shift to the Left and secure the establishment of a Democratic government;[32] while Berggren puts the accent on the rapproachement that took place on that occasion between Sweden and the USA, as both countries feared revolutionary developments in Europe.[33]

4.b Home politics

It is a widespread opinion that Palme, in spite of his radicalism in foreign policy — which however, as we have seen, is to be understood in the light of his effort to put forward Social

Democracy as a successful alternative to Communism — showed a willingness to compromise when domestic policy was concerned that often aroused dissatisfaction in his own ranks. If there is a wide consensus on the wave of reforms passed by his first government (1969-1976) – on gender equality, Welfare State, labour markets – that consolidated the notion of Sweden as a "model" country, other issues were highly controversial, both within the labour movement and in the relationship with the opposition. Here the focus will be on Palme's line with regard to the wage earners' funds, a cross which went along with him from the middle 1970s to 1983, and the so-called "Third Way", the economic policy introduced by Kjell Olof Feldt, minister of finance in the second Palme government (1982-1986). By examining these issues it will be perhaps easier to understand Östberg's, Eklund's and Berggren's concluding remarks on Palme's role in the history of Swedish Social Democracy.

Between 1975 and 1983, under the influence of the radicalization of society and of the debate of the perverse effects of the solidarity-focused wage policy[34] – a cornerstone of the Rehn-Meidner model, i.e. the Swedish model for economic policy from the late 1950s onwards – the Swedish labour movement discussed the proposal put forward between 1975 and 1976 by the leading economist of the General Labour Confederation (LO), Rudolf Meidner, so as to establish employee funds (*löntagarfonder*) that would gradually shift the ownership in medium to large companies from employers to workers.[35] The principle "equal pay for equal work", aiming at avoiding inequalities among employees, caused that profitable companies, not being required to pay wages commensurate with their higher profits, found themselves with a surplus that was not being redistributed among the workers, thus ultimately widening the gap between capital and labour.[36]

The debate on Wage Earners' Funds turned into a hot potato for the Social Democrats, who were about, in 1976, to face an uphill general election. Certainly, these funds did not help; the right-centre parties and the Employers' Association charged the labour movement with the will to introduce in Sweden a socialism of the Eastern kind.

The question which is interesting to raise when comparing different interpretations of Palme's politics is not so much why he was against the funds – his whole political education and experience led him to oppose socialization – but rather why the prime minister managed the issue in a way which has been blamed either as ambiguous (by the supporters of the

Meidner plan) or passive (by his opponents). Eklund and Berggren focus on the latter problem, the more "tactical" one, though not leaving out entirely the ideological dimension. Eklund's starting point is his own personal thesis, whereby Meidner's plan went far beyond what up to then had been discussed within the labour movement – and what in fact was needed – in order to resist the concentration of property; as it aimed at socializing the Swedish economy, it was not consistent with the Swedish model, which – as Eklund recalls – has identified in taxation, legislation and the Welfare State the counterbalance to Capital. On the other side, however, Eklund acknowledges that Palme was aware of the discussion which was going on within the LO, even if he expected that at the end the Union leadership would invite its activists to a realistic approach. But it did not go this way. As to the party leadership, after the 1973 general election, even if still in power, it had to face the "lottery-parliament" (the seats in parliament were equally divided between the two blocks) and it seemed not particularly interested in the issue; that is why Palme and his colleagues in the government did not follow it close up from the beginning.[37]

Berggren agrees on the idea that Palme, reluctant to interfere in the debate within the union, relied on the LO chairman, Gunnar Nilsson, in order to neutralize the funds; the latter nevertheless had to take into account the appreciation which the funds enjoyed among the workers. Furthermore, the personal relationship between the two labour leaders was not so good. Berggren points out as well that Palme had difficulty in understand the plan's core in itself. It seems that Palme said, referring to the LO's support to the plan: "They have gone further than what I had thought in my most unrestrained imagination!"[38]

Eklund discusses also Palme's political calculations: besides the workers' support to the project, it must be borne in mind that when the confrontation on the funds actual set up took place, between 1978 and 1980, the SAP was in opposition and for the first time Palme's leadership was questioned, not so much because of the electoral defeat in 1976, but due partly to his "flirt" with the Liberal party (then in power by a minority government), and partly to his intense engagement in international affairs (e.g. the Socialist International, the commission on disarmament, the Iran-Iraq war). Additionally, his upper class background could expose him to criticisms from the labour movement, if he dared go against the union on such a crucial issue. Finally, though against the funds on principle, he could not but support them in the face of the opponents' attacks: the enemy was not allowed to settle the labour movement's programs.[39]

Compared to Berggren's and Eklund's, Östberg's work devotes more attention to the ideological implications of Palme's dilemma. In the author's view, the wage earners' funds were the major issue among those which forced Palme to take a definite position between market and planning: it was unthinkable under that circumstance to keep the balance peculiar to the Social Democratic Third Way. Meidner's Plan was – this is Östberg's view – perhaps the most ticklish question Palme had to face. Paradoxically, the challenge – to question private property – did not come from the Left, but from the pillar, together with the SAP, of the Swedish way to reformism, that is to say, the union.

Whose influence on society was, in the first half of the 1970s, at its peak; but at the same time, the Swedish Employers' Confederation started right then its ideological and political counterattack. Palme's strategy was first to postpone the issue (after the 1976 general elections) and then to neutralize the most "subversive" elements in the plan, stressing from the beginning its compatibility with a market economy. And at last the aim – to reassure the business circles – was achieved by adding a fourth goal to the three formulated by Meidner (to transfer a quote of profits from capitalists to workers; to oppose property and wealth concentration; to establish workers' influence on the economy through property): to favour capital formation, for the benefit of industrial investments. This was not exactly what had aroused, in 1975-1976, the union activists' enthusiasm. In the early 1980s, the Meidner plan, then completely perverted, came to be incorporated into the program against the economic crisis worked out by the SAP.[40]

Noteworthy is that while the three biographers agree that the law on funds passed by the parliament in 1983 and introducing a pension funds scheme, had nothing to do with Meidner's original plan, they differ as far as the effectiveness of Palme's line is concerned. For Eklund, the whole discussion on the wage earners' funds was one of Palme's worst failures from an ideological point of view, as he stayed all the time on the defensive and contributed to a deep demoralization in the labour movement's ranks.[41] On the contrary, Palme's strategy seems to Östberg to have been successful, in terms of impact on the public opinion: he could neutralize the plan, without provoking too serious inner splits.[42] Berggren is more neutral, just joining under the category of "symbol-politics" the impressive demonstration against the funds held by the Employers' Confederation on October 4, 1982 and the passing of the law few weeks later.[43]

The program against the ongoing economic crisis implemented by the second Palme government and to which, as we have seen, the wage earners' funds were utilized, is considered as well one of the most controversial chapters in his political career.[44] In 1982 the minister of finance Kjell Olof Feldt presented three alternatives: an expansionist policy; a restrictive one; and what he called "the big bang", that is to say, a policy aiming at stimulating investments and production, but at the same time squeezing domestic demand by means of devaluation. The last one was accepted. On this point, it is of particular interest to read Eklund's points, as he was one of Feldt's staff members. According to him, Palme and Feldt failed in the task of curbing the spiral of inflation, provoked by unrestrained wage claims by the unions. Palme showed once again – this is Eklund's thesis – his weakness before the unions, portrayed by the author as a short-sighted organization, unable or unwilling to grasp the requirements of the economic system.[45] However, in the pages dealing with the "war of the roses", that is to say, the unions' dissatisfaction with the SAP's profit-oriented economic policy, the author recognizes that the labour movement had to accept major changes in the Swedish model yet with no return (e.g. an active industrial policy or wage earners' funds worthy of the name).[46]

Berggren is content with reporting Palme's satisfaction for the economic recovery, which he comments upon in an interview given on February, 28 1986 (mind the date) when he declared, with a tragic irony of fate, that 1986 was a year full of opportunities,[47] thereby acknowledging that Feldt's policy was effective and that the Social Democrats had once again fortune on their side.[48] Yet, the long-term consequences, both economic and political, of the shift begun under Palme are not deepened by Berggren. They come instead in the forefront in Östberg's work, where it is pointed out that the real nature of the "Third way" (as the new economic policy was called, i.e. neither expansionist nor restrictive) was bound to be widely discussed. Was it consistent with a Social Democratic orientation or did it mean the surrender to Neo-Liberalism? Certainly Palme supported his minister of finance, and he did so by arguing that the new economic policy was a condition for preserving the Welfare State.[49] Nevertheless – and this is one of the crucial points in Östberg's biography – Palme accepted it as a necessary evil, while to Feldt's eyes the policy was dictated by a long-term adaptation, perceived as unavoidable, to a more market-oriented political climate. As a sign of the ideological disagreement between the two leading Social Democratic politicians, Östberg brings forward Palme's disappointment when Feldt made a statement in favour of the privatization of Swedish pre-schools; also in his last interview,

few hours before being murdered, Palme confirmed his strong support to the public sector, which he regarded as a key aspect of modern civilisation.[50]

Berggren too reports Palme's firm reaction to the openings to neo-liberalism made by his minister of finance, but the interpretation of their relationship is definitely different. Palme was moved, Berggren argues, not so much by the concern of safeguarding a distinct Social Democratic platform, but rather by tactic calculations: a breakdown in the labour movement tradition would have caused inner splits and favoured the building of a competing party on the Left. Berggren agrees that Palme was against privatization, but at the same time the author believes that the prime minister shared many of Feldt's viewpoints and perhaps that is why he reacted so firmly. With a member of the government staff Palme indeed seems (Berggren unfortunately does not refer to any source) to have made clear his awareness that increased competition, effectiveness and freedom of choice *within* the public sector (a condition that Berggren should have emphasized) were needed.[51]

Eklund's version is somehow in the middle: he recognizes an ideological gap between Palme and Feldt, but reduces it essentially to a matter of make-up: the former kept a more traditional rhetoric when arguing in favour of the new economic policy, while the latter made no secret of the fact that the "Third way" was part of a process of "modernization" of the national economy.[52] Palme's early and vehement condemnation of the dangers inborn in Neo-Liberalism – social atomization, destruction of the environment, democracy turned into an empty box – is not mentioned here.

5. Continuity or breakdown?

Maybe Palme was only tired or even depressed because of the long time in the frontline, the many troubles that he had to face from the very beginning since coming back in power in 1982 (the U-boat affair, the Bofors and the Harvard scandals, incessant union unrest), and the many personal attacks that he suffered from; maybe he was planning to leave, perhaps accepting an appointment as United Nations (UN) Commissar on Refugees, or staying on for a while.[53] What is certain is that everything was shattered by the shots which echoed in

the evening of February 28, 1986.

Berggren, with a choice that can be disappointing to the reader and nonetheless reveals some elegance, stops his long story then, when the Swedish prime minister died in the heart of the city where he had spent all his life, not far from his childhood home, close to the SAP building, next to the wife he had been married with over nearly thirty years.[54] Nothing is said on the inquiry that followed.

Eklund shortly summarizes what happened in the aftermath: the widespread belief that a murder of a prime minister can not but be the outcome of a plot; the only person ever charged with the crime (and then released) being a single and violent individual, Christer Pettersson; the kind of private investigation (backed by the SAP leadership) which did its best to confirm the PKK (the Communist party of Kurdistan) hypothesis.[55] Eklund writes nothing about the tremendous failure of the Swedish justice in an inquiry that has exceeded even the one on the murder of US president John F. Kennedy.

Östberg's second volume takes up in the end an epic style: on the one hand we follow a man and a politician who was fed up, worried for the world and for his own safety, getting older and no longer as unquestionable as he had been in the 1970s;[56] on the other hand, we enter the opaque area of hate campaigns arranged by a blend of different groups, ranging from the extreme right of the Employers' Confederation to unaffiliated anarchic psychopaths, affecting Palme in his last years more than ever before.[57] In other countries the relationship between a murder and the preceding hate campaign against the victim has been regularly scrutinised, apart from the person who materially committed the murder; in Sweden this scrutiny has been less common. Under this perspective, Östberg definitely contributes a significant study. Besides, his chapter devoted to the murder and the ensuing inquiry is a useful and involving reconstruction of what happened and what ought not to happen, yet without trying to add one more Truth about the murder to the long list of hypotheses – some of them pretty fanciful – formulated until now.[58]

After twenty-five years the murder is still unresolved, the SAP has lost two elections in a row (2006 and 2010), and Palme remains a controversial issue. Who was Olof Palme? Which was the connection between the Olof Palme who made the US government fly into a fury due to his condemnation of Imperialism and the Olof Palme who backed the business-

friendly “Third way” in economic policy?

It has to be noted here that the three biographers are all fascinated by his talent, meant both as intellectual brightness and as ability in problem-solving (hence Palme’s success in bringing forth actual reforms); yet they acknowledge too that this talent could turn into a double-edged weapon in the relations, both political and personal, with others.[59]

In Eklund’s final remarks, Palme appears as the highest expression in Sweden of the 1950s and 1960s *Zeitgeist*: the commitment to achieve demanding and long-term reforms; nevertheless he is also described as unlucky, for his appointment as prime minister in 1969 took place at the same time when the Golden Age ended, and he was not inclined to face a downward age.[60] What has been perceived by someone as Palme’s ambiguity or contradiction, or, worse, opportunism, depended instead on a diverse approach to the different fields of reality: Palme was left-wing as far as social, educational and foreign policy were concerned, but he was right-wing as to economic and security policy. He personified the unending swing in Swedish Social Democracy between Democratic Socialism and Social Democracy.[61]

Berggren’s interpretation is equally continuity-oriented: Palme was a democrat, moved to politics more by an “existential” choice than by an ideological conviction; along his whole life, he remained a pragmatist. As such, his role can not be defined either as a Cold War soldier (under the 1950s standard banners) nor as an anti-imperialist (under the 1960s and the early 1970s ones). Rather, Palme showed the typical Social Democratic ability to achieve viable arrangements. After tracing Palme’s relationship with politics back to his existentialist philosophy – a puzzling thesis broadly developed in the book– Berggren goes further in his accentuation of Palme’s individualistic dimension – and in the removal of the socialist one. The other distinguishing features that he singles out are indeed, besides the international perspective, Palme’s belief that the individual has a duty to pursue what he maintains to be Truth and Justice, and Palme’s strong volunteerism.[62] In the end, according to Berggren’s biography, Palme seems to have shared with Swedish Social Democracy only an attitude to compromise, on one side, and to modernization, on the other side; the latter element implied also to improve people’s living conditions, but more in a liberal perspective (i.e. to give everybody the chance to lead his own existence) than in an endeavour to make society more equal.[63] According to Berggren’s analysis, Palme’s

awareness that society can safeguard freedom only by securing equality (and in a substantive meaning) is negligible.[64]

Östberg's conclusions are more complex with regard to the dilemma continuity *vs* breakdown. Palme was behind the times until the Golden Age went on; in the mid-1960s he was able to understand, thanks to his good relationship with intellectuals and young people, that the *Zeitgeist* was changing. That favoured the portrait of him as a radical, but also the disappointment of those who had misunderstood Palme's position. He was not a radical, Östberg stresses; rather he took his place in the party centre-wing. His condemnation of colonialism and violence was sincere, and at the same time perfectly consistent with his reformism: he hoped and believed indeed that sooner or later the countries fighting for their liberation would have followed the Swedish way, that is to say, the achievement of political, social and economic democracy by reformist politics. Somehow he contributed to the radicalism of that age without being a radical.[65] The impact of the reforms passed under his first government was such as to raise in many (both sympathizers and opponents) the question: are the Social Democrats about to reverse the Swedish system?

To this climate Palme contributed by the radicalism accompanying the passage of the reforms. But – Östberg insists on this crucial passage – when the borders of Swedish reformism were questioned, e.g. on the occasion of the debate on the wage earners' funds, he refused to go over. He lost touch with the *Zeitgeist*, as the historical phase when he had developed his ideas and approach – the age of the trust in never-ending economic growth and therefore in an increasing Welfare State– was over. This loss was not Palme's failure, but the result of the challenge issued by the ongoing economic crisis and the spreading of Neo-Liberalism to the whole Swedish Social Democracy. From the 1950s to the 1980s Palme maintained a unitary vision, although trying to tailor it to changing conditions: the task was to extend democracy from the political dimension to the social and economic one, yet without questioning private property.[66] Such was Olof Palme in fact: when blaming the USA and the USSR for their arrogance and oppression, when putting gender equality on the agenda, when flirting with the Liberal Party, or neutralizing the more demanding union claims; he was a Social Democrat, who experienced the shift from an age when everything seemed possible to a crisis undermining all the certainties and requiring new answers.

How and whether Palme's heirs have succeeded in this hard task: to be up to the new

challenges without getting rid of the Social Democratic tradition – hence of Palme's legacy too – is today, at least apparently, matter for discussion, in one of the toughest phases of the party's history.

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[1] See Å. Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia. Historieskrivning som ideologisk maktresurs 1892-2000*, Stockholm, Atlas, 2001, pp. 108-111.

[2] See B. Östergren, *Vem är Olof Palme? Ett politiskt porträtt*, Stockholm, Timbro, 1984; Claes Arvidsson, *Olof Palme. Med verkligheten som fiende*, Stockholm, Timbro, 2007. Noteworthy is that the publisher of both these highly polemic works, come out at a distance of twenty-three years, is the same, the new-liberal think-tank "Timbro".

[3] Among the many possible references, K. and P. Poutiainen, *Inuti labyrinten: om mordet på Olof Palme*, Stockholm, Grimur, 1995 (on the domestic track); J. Bondeson, *Blood on the Snow. The Killing of Olof Palme*, Ithaca, Cornell University, 2005 (on the track related to the traffic in arms); H. Hederberg, *Offret & gärningsmannen: en essä om mordet på Olof Palme*, Stockholm, Atlantis, 2010 (guilty: Christer Pettersson, the only person sentenced, yet then released, for the murder).

[4] B. Elmbrant, *Palme*, Stockholm, Fischer&Rye, 1989.

[5] P. Antman, P. Schori, *Den gränslöse reformisten*, Stockholm, Rabén Prisma/Tiden Debatt, 1996.

[6] See E. Åsard (ed. by), *Politikern Olof Palme*, Stockholm, Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2002, focusing on Palme's view of politics, massmedia, foreign policy and rhetoric.

[7] See for instance A. Kullenberg, *Palme och kvinnorna*, 1996; U. Larsson, *Olof Palme och utbildningspolitiken*, Stockholm, Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2003; A.-M. Ekengren, *Olof Palme och utrikespolitiken*, Umeå, Boréa, 2005; G. Björk, *Olof Palme och medierna*. Umeå, Boréa, 2006.

[8] See I. Carlsson, *Ur skuggan av Olof Palme*, Stockholm, Hjalmarson & Högberg, 1999 and

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T.G. Peterson, *Olof Palme som jag minns honom*, Stockholm, Bonnier, 2002.

[9] K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden. Olof Palme 1927-1969*, Stockholm, Leopard, 2008; see, on this e-journal, IV, 2009, 1, my review.

[10] Id., *När vinden vände. Olof Palme 1969-1986*, Stockholm, Leopard, 2009; I have reviewed both the volumes in *Olof Palme e i venti della storia*, "Meridiana", 2008, 62, pp. 233-243.

[11] K. Eklund, *Palme*, Stockholm, Bonnier, 2010.

[12] H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss. En biografi över Olof Palme*, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2010.

[13] In order to accomplish such a task, I will profit by the "confrontation" among the three biographers arranged by the "Liberala Klubben" at the ABF (*Arbetarnas bildningsförbund*, Workers' Educational Association) in Stockholm, on December 8, 2010, which I attended to.

[14] See K. Östberg, *Inledning*, in Id., *I takt med tiden* cit., pp. 13-14.

[15] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 8.

[16] See K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, pp. 61-68 (on the USA), pp. 74-76 (Eastern Europe), pp. 104-106 (on Asia);. H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 111-141 (USA), pp. 156-159; K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 22-23.

[17] See K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, pp. 108-112; K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 24.

[18] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 24.

[19] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, p. 421.

[20] M. Weber, *La politica come professione*, in *Il lavoro intellettuale come professione* (1919), Torino, Einaudi, 1983, pp. 120-121; for the English translation, see

www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/ethos/Weber-vocation.pdf.

[21] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 109.

[22] See K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, p. 394; H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 313-315.

[23] One month after the speech, the USA embassy in Stockholm sent a report to the State Department in Washington where the event that Palme would be appointed as the next prime minister was faced with anxiety. Cfr. K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, p. 279.

See the English translation in http://www.olofpalme.org.

[25] See O. Palme, *For My Lai in our hearts…* (1970), and a partial English translation of it in *Olof Palme speaking. Articles and Speeches*, ed. by G. Banks, Stockholm, Premiss, 2006, pp. 137-141.

[26] See O. Palme, *Hanoi, Christmas 1972* (1972), in *Olof Palme speaking*, pp. 141-142.

[27] See K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, pp. 165-166.

[28] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 43.

[29] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 355-357.

[30] See K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, pp. 309-311.

[31] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 131-139.

[32] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 64.

[33] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 517-518.

[34] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 527.

[35] See the English translation of the 1975 Report, R. Meidner (with the assistance of A. Hedborg and G. Fond), *Employee investment funds : an approach to collective capital formation*, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1978.

[36] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 72.

[37] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 72-75.

[38] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 529-532; Palme's quotation p. 531 (the Author yet does not refer the source of Palme's statement).

[39] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 76-77.

[40] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 247-256.

[41] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 78.

[42] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 258-259.

[43] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 627-628. The confrontation on the wage earners' funds, that is, the inner splits between the LO and the SAP and within the SAP, and the bourgeois mobilization, is however reconstructed quite hastily by the author.

[44] According to Östberg, it is one of the most controversial issue in the whole Swedish contemporary history. See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, p. 299.

[45] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 91-92.

[46] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 103-104.

[47] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 655.

[48] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 617.

[49] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 301-304, within the chapter on *The War of the Roses*.

[50] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, p. 312.

[51] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 639-640.

[52] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 93.

[53] Eklund's idea is that Palme would have left in 1987, or perhaps two years later (after the 1988 general election), and that his successor would have been Anna-Greta Leijon; in other words, the SAP would have elected its first female party leader in the late 1980s, and not in 2007. Paradoxically, Leijon's political career was damaged due right to a scandal involving the party leadership which had to do with the inquiry on the murder of Palme. See K. Eklund, *Palme*, p. 123.

[54] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 657.

[55] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 106-107.

[56] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 366-385.

[57] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 362-365.

[58] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 386-405.

[59] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 108-109; K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, passim; H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, passim.

[60] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 108-109 and 113.

[61] See K. Eklund, *Palme*, pp. 120-121.

[62] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, p. 179.

[63] See H. Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss*, pp. 333-334.

[64] See P. Antman, *Arvet efter Palme* , in P. Antman, P. Schori, *Den gränslöse reformisten*, pp. 45-48.

[65] See K. Östberg, *I takt med tiden*, pp. 394-396.

[66] See K. Östberg, *När vinden vände*, pp. 417-418.