During the 1990s, gender studies have been strongly influenced by post-structuralist theory. As a consequence, the notion of gender is described as “historical” and “constructed” in opposition to a (theoretically) assumed concept of women or gender as “essentialist” or “a-historical”. Many studies, published during the last decade, aim at analyzing different constructions of gender in various historical, cultural or societal contexts. However, the studies are often descriptive, without a theoretical discussion, and without analysing what causes a certain form of construction of gender. Often, the presumption of “construction” is rhetorical and turns to a new form of “essentialism”. The object of this paper is to challenge this position.

The debate in women’s studies during the 1970s and early 1980s, focused on the roots to the problems of women oppression and sought to explain the subordination of women in society. A central problem was how to understand women’s situation in relation to other social relations and societal structures.

This debate around 1980 about these issues is known as the “Unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism”-debate. The main issue was how to relate oppression of women by men (what we today name as gender power relations) to the capitalist economic system and the suppression of the working class; i.e. socio-economic relations were the explanatory factors. The explanations were influenced by the dominating theory of that time – Marxism. However, Marxism could not offer a sufficient theoretical explanation. Instead the solution was the dual-system-theory. The women oppression was explained by theories of patriarchy on the one hand, suppression of the working class by Marxist economic theory which was understood as external to gender relations on the other. The debate did not lead to a comprehensive theory, instead to two diverging unrelated theories.

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1 I leave the critique of the concept of gender from queer theory aside in this paper.
2 The contributions to the debate are published in Sargent (1981).
The theoretical problem of how the organization of society and the gender relations are related is still of great importance in a time of an expanding capitalist economic system on the global arena, and in its wake, growing gaps between women and men, ethnical groups, classes and geographical regions.

In this paper, by using the theoretical achievements in the field of gender studies I will return to the problem of the old debate – gender relations relationship to socio-economic structures. First, I will discuss the concept of gender, next by using my definition of gender I will present how socio-economic structures and gender relations are interweaved. Here, I will apply my definition of gender to a historical example – wages as an expression for a certain composition of gender relations during the industrialization process. Finally, I will claim that gender relations have no internal dynamics. Gender relations are shaped by, and only by, other societal relations and structures.

The concept of gender

Since Gayle Rubin presented her concept sex/gender system, gender has been a concept under debate. Here I will limit myself to two quite different understandings of the notion of gender – the post-structuralist proposal by Joan Scott, well-known to the international academic community, and a structuralist inspired definition suggested by Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman. The definition elaborated by Hirdman has had an important impact on the Nordic debate in the field of gender studies, not only in the discipline history but also in other fields of humanities and social sciences. Unfortunately, Hirdman’s contribution has not been introduced to the international debate. Therefore, I will here make a more detailed presentation of her gender system theory.

Joan Scott and the concept of gender

The concept gender presented by Joan Scott, first published 1986, was inspired both by the linguistic philosophic renewal of the Freudian psychoanalysis by Jacque Lacan, and Michel Foucault’s theoretical concept discourse. Scott defines gender as “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes, and gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power.” Gender is a Foucaultian inspired discourse, signifying meaning of differences between bodies. The discourse manifests itself through symbols, normative concepts, social institutions and

3 Rubin (1975).
4 I use Scott’s definition from 1986 (Scott 1988). She has lately criticized the misuse of the word gender and prefers instead “sex difference” (Scott 1999). The same critique has been delivered in the Swedish feminist debate, both inside and outside the academia. However, in the Swedish language the word kön is an alternative concept, which I use instead of the term genus (English gender). Kön is an ambiguous concept. The English words sex and gender can both be translated into kön. I find kön a good concept, avoiding the problems of the fluid limits between the “non-constructed” body and the social constructed gender. Kön is a floating term, opening up the theoretical understanding of differences between women and men.
organizations, and in the subjective identity of humans. Gender as a discourse is also power. Power presupposes differences and since gender is the most fundamental and basic difference between humans, gender is a basis for uneven distribution of symbolic and material resources. Then, gender is implicit in the construction of power as well as in the concept itself. Gender justifies power, but is also a metaphor for power, signifying difference. Language, in the philosophical sense, is fundamental in Scott’s definition of gender. Language forms a system of meaning or knowledge, expressing how humans perceive life or the world. Scott understands gender as a knowledge of difference between male and female bodies; language articulates social interpretations of gender differences.⁶

According to me, one of the advantages with Scott’s concept, gender is the emphasis on both the fundamental importance of gender for societal organised institutions, and for these institutions understanding of themselves, as well as for the identity developed by the single individuals. As a consequence, understanding of all kinds of social phenomena is impossible without taking gender into considerations. Another advantage is the emphasis on gender as constructed by cultures and societies. Gender, as knowledge, must be understood in a context, in relation to the historical, specific society in which it is produced. Gender is located in the social institutions of every society, inseparable from the society in which knowledge of gender is articulated. These two aspects of Scott’s definition of gender make it possible to solve the problem in the dual-system-theory. Economic systems and class relations as well as women oppression are all gendered phenomena – interrelated, inseparable.

My critique against Scott’s notion of gender is addressed to its philosophical, ontological foundations. Language, as meaning, only gives one dominating understanding of the world. It determines our interpretations and therefore, our actions. With this definition of gender it is hard to understand how changes in gender relations occur, but also the role of the single individual in processes of change and transformation of society. This is of special importance when discussion gender studies with emancipatory ambitions. What freedom of action ascribes the single individual if language or meaning restricts our possibilities to change the world; if action is a discursive effect?

**Yvonne Hirdman and the theory of gender system**

Yvonne Hirdman suggests an alternative definition of gender with roots in structuralist theory. She works with three interrelated concepts – gender, gender system and gender contract⁷. *Gender* refers to ideas (not discourses) of masculinity and femininity. She claims that “gender can be understood as a variability of ideas of “men” and “women” (ideas that always use biological differences between bodies) which give rise to notions and social actions which also have influence on biology...⁸. Ideas of “men” and “women” refer to ideology or systems of thoughts. Ideas of gender form humans into men

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and women and direct their actions. Gender manifests itself in institutionalized differences and hierarchies of power. Hirdman emphasises the central role of biology (bodies). Gender relations ultimately respond to different roles of men and women in the biological process of reproduction. Women, but not men, give birth to children. But Hirdman claims that the ideas of “biology” are instable, changeable and socially constituted. Even if Hirdman, like Scott, points out gender as a relation built on difference, she also stresses close points of similarity between men and women – both men and women perceive the world in the same way.

Hirdman systematizes the ideas of gender to a structure designated as a gender system. The gender system is the organization of notions of gender on all domains of society. It is a fundamental social structure influencing all other structures as politics, economics, social relations, etc. The gender system is clearly distinguishable historically as well as geographically. The influence from structuralist theory is manifested in two patterns (or laws in the metaphorical sense of the world) that rule the gender system – the segregation of women and men (difference) and the male norm (hierarchy). The gender system is imperative and forces on to the individuals via difference and hierarchy. The two patterns cooperate. The first pattern legitimates the second since the subordination of women can only be maintained by segregation between women and men.

The third concept elaborated by Hirdman – the gender contract - is the manifestation of gender and gender system historically and geographically. It is possible to read specific forms of the two laws in the gender contract. Hirdman uses the term contract but emphasises that she uses it as a metaphor. The concept shall not be associated with traditional ideas of contract as an exchange between two equal parts. Women and men are both born into and formed by the gender system. The system limits their potential to act and forces on to them certain kinds of social possibilities and restrictions. The term gender contract is an open concept and makes it possible to analyse the complex reality in which men and women live and act. One of the advantages of the concept is to show how single individuals reproduce and uphold the gender system; another, to elucidate how women, through their actions, take part in the maintaining of the gender system - in their own subordination. Therefore, the gender contract is an expression of the dependence between women and men. The contract ties women and men to each other.9

Hirdman’s theory has many good points; the emphasis on structures of the gender relations, on materiality, on action, the mutuality between action and thought. According to Hirdman, actions and ideas have the same importance in the construction of gender and gender system. Action is ruled by ideas but action has impacts on ideas. In Hirdman’s theory social practice exists before language in the philosophical or discursive sense. Another good point is the role of the individual actor in the construction of gender.

9 In her own research, the gender contract is the term she has used most in her analysis, see for example Hirdman (1998) and (2002).
However, one problem is the two patterns that rule the gender system. The male norm is taken for granted and regarded as an established universal fact. The power of men is unproblemized and Hirdman assigns it to the realm of human reproduction – the “trump card” of the gender system. Then, male power is determined by biology, not by social relations. Instead, according to me, power must be analysed in a historical and societal context, in relation to how gender is constructed in different kinds of societies. Male gender power developed in certain kinds of societies must be explained. For example, if the effect of the organization of human reproduction in a specific form of society results in the subordination and oppression of women by men, it has to be explained. If it is postulated by theory, the analysis is anticipated.

This part of Hirdman’s theory is a result of the structuralist approach. The gender system as a structure determines women and men. It also contrasts with the more open concept gender contract which gives the actors a more active role. Another problem, the concept gender system claims that the system rules other forms of systems like political and economical ones. How this influence works is not discussed. As a consequence, in combination with the postulated two patterns, it is hard for the researcher not to isolate the conditions regarding gender relations from other forms of social relations (or structures). The same criticism that has been passed on towards the dual-system theory can be addressed to Hirdman’s. The dual-system theory described economy as a fundamental material structure separated from the structure of women oppression, the patriarchy. Hirdman’s concept gender system suffers from the same problem and the gender system can only be described as an isolated phenomena with its own patterns or laws. I will suggest an alternative definition of gender.

**Gender as a social relation**

I share the points of view of Scott and Hirdman: gender is fundamental for all kinds of social relations, the importance of the context, the significance of both meaning and actions. But, in contrast to Scott and Hirdman, I do not define gender as a discourse or as a structure, but as a social relation.

For me, the gendered position of the single individual in relation to other individuals is determined by the body of the human. Women and men are lived bodies and every human experiences the world through its body. As a consequence, the actions of the individual are gendered; i.e. marked by the body who takes action. To me, action is of primary importance. Action includes, in addition to acting, thoughts and speech acts.

Actions are performed by a subject – a single individual. Actions are directed towards others or objects. So, women and men, have the possibilities to, through actions both reproduce and transcend gender relations. For example, women can through emancipatory actions transform their position vis-à-vis men. The actions of women and men toward each other take place in a context, external to gender relations, which has an effect on their actions. Therefore, analysis of gender relations as a social relation can not be carried out without considerations of specific circumstances under which
gendered humans act. In this perspective, the problem of male gender power must be interpreted as a specific, historical phenomena, analytically distinguished from the definition of the concept of gender. Unlike Scott and Hirdman, to whom power is the discourse or patterns of the gender system respectively, I will claim power is constituted, exercised and transformed by the actions of women and men. Hence, gender power and its special forms of expression, is intertwined with other types of power relations.

What does this proposed definition mean for the problem discussed in this paper? How shall an analysis of gender relations as an expression for a certain historical, socio-economic context be designed?

**Gender relations and socio-economic transformation**

Below in this paper, I will suggest a solution based on my research (as an economic historian) on the transformation of gender relations during the industrialization of Sweden (1870-1939) – a period of great societal change.\(^{10}\)

People living during a period of great societal transformation have to react to the pressure of changes. From the beginning, they act as they always have been. They use the same solutions and patterns of behaviours as they are accustomed to do, to solve problems that the societal change generates and confronts them to. As long as these solutions or ways of acting function they keep on using them. Only when these actions or solutions stop working they try to find other ways to solve their problems and seek new ways of behaving. They try many different ways or solutions and after a while the ones that work become stable, permanent and a part of societal structure. The ones that do not fit in disappear. The new solutions or patterns of action become a type of “norms” which assign how problems shall be solved and how people shall act. These “norms” also identify the “normal” and “abnormal”, the “problems” but also the “non-problems”. A new notion of how the reality is constituted emerges as a result of the humans altered actions. This notion is often unarticulated by humans themselves. The obvious, the “natural” is nothing they discuss or talk about, but, and this is important, the notion of reality has impacts on their actions.\(^{11}\) During this process traditional gendered acting by humans will be forwarded as long as it works without problem. At the same moment when it becomes an obstruction to the transformation process, it is forced to change and adopt itself to the new historical situation.

The industrialization in Western Europe developed from a traditional, peasant society based on an agrarian, self-subsistent economy. In this society, the household was the basic societal institution. During the industrialization some elements of the traditional society passed on and were adapted to the emerging industrial, capitalist society by human actions; other disappeared. The actors had a collective

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\(^{10}\) Norlander (2000).

\(^{11}\) Salmonsson (1988).
experience of the traditional society, its social relations, norms and interpretations of reality. As long as this experience gave sufficient solutions to the problem the industrialization process presented to them, they forwarded the traditional ways of acting. But, only when they became inadequate, they were forced to find new ways. Thus, they went through the process described above.

**The traditional peasant household as a model for gender relations**

The traditional, agrarian household was the basic societal institution and can briefly be described as follows: In a peasant society all kinds of activities were performed within the framework of the household; production of food, clothes, tools, buildings, etc. as well as all kinds of caring and training of children, nursing the sick and poor (reproduction of the labour force). The household composition could consist of a nuclear family but most commonly, other individuals as well, such as relatives and servants. Not only peasants but also others such as artisans, merchants and aristocracy lived in smaller or bigger households. The household was self-sufficient, and market and money as exchange forms were of less importance. In a peasant society circulation (exchange) of commodities and people was of limited extent and took preferably place between households. People lived under scarcity of economic resources and had a low standard of living compared to Western, modern capitalist societies of our time. As a consequence, the needs and interests of the single individual were subordinate to the needs of the group – to all members of the household, the needs to survive. In the household, each single individual was assigned position, rights and duties according to age, gender and civil status. The allocation of the rights and duties was regulated by legislation.

The household was run under the leadership of a master. In normal cases the master was a married man. The function of the master was aimed at guaranteeing the reproduction of the household over time including the support of all household members, irrespective of their working capacity and possibilities to contribute to the support of the household. Therefore, the tasks of the master were to manage work, dispose the property of the household members and represent the members in public. The master was a person with the status of majority.

The master’s wife, the married woman, was of legal incapacity, subordinate to her husband. He exercised power over her, her labour and her property. He also had the right to use violence against her if she refused to obey his wishes. If the male master died, the widow became the master of the household (if there were no male relatives that could replace him).12 The most important role of the married woman, in a society of no market exchange of property, was to give birth to heirs – to guarantee the survival of the household over time. Therefore, her sexuality was restricted and controlled by the master and the kin – a regulation codified in the common and ecclesiastical laws.

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12 If he is sick or of cause of other circumstances, with no possibility to fulfil his duties, his wife could with the permission of her husband, have full authority in the household.
Also, the children were subordinated to the master/father. The daughter never became of full age and the father was her guardian; i.e. made the decision if she could marry and with whom. The son was subordinated to the father’s mastership as long as he lived in the parents’ household, even if he comes of age.

Thus, within this traditional household, women and men had different, unequal rights and duties, related to the need to support the household members. They also had uneven access to economic resources. These gendered differences were a part of the societal structure, and the norms were codified in the law. During the transition of the agrarian society to a modern industrial capitalist one the above described historical formed gendered relations played an important role. These features were, with local differences, common in all Western European, pre-capitalist societies.

However, the transition was a slow process. At the beginning people, both men and women, acted as they always had been, influenced by norms and customs evident to that time. As a consequence, the gendered relations were forwarded as long as they were no hindrance to the process of industrialization. During the industrialization the factories were organized, based on the model of the peasant household, like big self-sustained households in which women and men were assigned traditional positions. This is readable in the gendered division of labour, structures of authority and value of work. However, during this process of transition the notion of these positions were transformed and adapted to the emerging new society under the pressure from new socio-economic forces.

Below, I will illustrate the process of transformation of gender relations by an example regarding wages.

**Gendered wage systems**

During the early period of industrialization the wage-system was formed in the same way as in the pre-capitalist society – the wages were related to the status of the worker and his or her position in the household. Women gained half or less than half of the men’s wages. When the working-class household was established this gendered social relationship was forwarded and the wage-system in the factories related the workers to his or her position in the working-class household. Within this household the gendered positions were the same as in the traditional household, with some alternation concerning the support of the household members. The married woman continued to work in the same way as in a self-supporting household with duties related to the reproduction of the labour force and some production of goods, while the married man, and sometimes the growing children, contributed to the support by wage-earning. However, the married man was still the master, with the same authority as in the peasant society. As a consequence, he was supposed to be the “breadwinner” of the household.
A married woman was not expected to work outside the family household, while the (young) unmarried woman could work as a wage earner, as a “factory girl”.

The wage system in the early factory system reflected the different household positions of the male and female worker. At the beginning, the wage was not related to the effort of the worker in the factory but to his or her needs in the household. The male worker as breadwinner received a wage based on the cost of supporting himself and his family, while the female worker received a wage half or less than half of the male “breadwinner’s” wage, which was supposed to support only herself. This was a so called “living wage”. The notion of “living wage” was not only a part of the early factory system but also spread to all spheres of wage-earning. With the establishment of the “living wage” pre-capitalist gendered status positions were forwarded to and incorporated into industrial society, along with the notion of the household as the basis of subsistence for the single individual. Thus, during this period of industrialization the traditional gender relations were not called into question. They still worked and were integrated as an inseparable part of the new socio-economic institutions in the emerging capitalist, industrial society.

During the early decades of the 20th century, a process of reinterpretation of the wage concept began. The “living wage” became an “incentive payment”; i.e. a so called payment for work done, not for the needs of the support of the worker. This process was a response to increased competition on the commodity market. Companies were forced to reorganize the work organization and to improve the efficiency with the help of time and motion studies and the introduction of piecework (Taylorism), all in order to lower the production costs. During the course of this process, a new interpretation of wages emerged.

However, when the level of the new “incentive wage” was calculated, the engineers and managers – the social actors of the process – never called the traditional gendered wage levels into question. Instead, they forwarded the gap between women’s and men’s wages in a slow step-by-step process in which traditional notions of the status of the worker was taken for granted. The women workers never questioned the gender gap either. In other words, the male “incentive payment” was established on the basis of the “breadwinner’s” wage, while the woman’s payment was determined according to the “factory girl’s”. Despite the fact that the “incentive payment” was interpreted as “objective”, “measurable” and “payment for work done”, the “incentive payment” obscured the underlying social relationship – the status of the gendered worker.

However, during the process of changing the notions of wage, the gendered wage gap decreased. Women’s “living wage” was around half or less the half of the male worker’s wage. The “incentive payment” on the other hand represented improved women wages and during the Inter War Period the female labour force gained around two-thirds of the male wage. This improvement was an effect of the changing work organization during that time. As a result of time and motion studies, workers worked harder and produced more in a shorter time. Women workers were often employed to fulfil monotonous, un-skilled tasks, easily divided into parts. The workers were easily replaced since the
tasks did not acquire training. During the Inter War Period the work was often organized along assembly lines. By improving the in work organization it became possible to multiply the production and less numbers of hands could produce more. The cost of labour decreased and made it possible to increase the wages for the remaining workforce, specially for the women workers.

The transformation of the notion of the wage during the period of industrialization had different repercussions for women and men due to their disparate positions in the household. The position of the male worker as the head of the household, real or prospective, entitled him to a higher wage than the woman worker. During the period of industrialization the male worker’s wage was related to his responsibility to support the members of the household. Therefore, the level of the male worker’s traditional status-related wage could, via the “living wage”, be transformed into an “incentive payment” – on a higher level than the woman worker’s. The woman worker’s wage level was also related to her position in the household. In the pre-capitalist household, the master was responsible for supporting her. During the process of industrialization, subsistence for the woman worker was still related to her position in the household, with her civil status as the ultimate determinative factor. The unmarried working-class woman was supposed to support herself with the money she earned, while the married woman performed unpaid work in the household and could rely on the support of her husband. The interpretation of the “factory girl” as self-sufficient, free from responsibility of providing for dependants, made it possible to transform the pre-capitalist wage level, via the “living wage”, into an “incentive payment” on a lower level than the male worker’s.

**Transition of gender relations**

This illustrated how gender relations and other societal relations, in this case socio-economic relations, are inseparably intertwined. The case shows that during the Inter War Period two different conflicting forces were at work since market relations endeavour to sameness while traditional household relations were built on difference. Therefore, on the one hand, new socio-economic capitalist relations (market forces) compelled societal changes of wages, resulting in improvements in women wages and in a new interpretation of the notion of wage as related to the work done and not to the position of the worker in the household. These were steps toward degendering the workforce and improving the situation for women in society. But on the other hand, traditional notions of gender counteracted the market forces – male and female bodies were still gendered in the traditional sense. Labour division and traditional notions of women’s and men’s status played an important role for the restraining forces.

The concept of gender developed since the debate on the dual-system-theory gives, possibilities to analyse how gender relations and other social relations work together in mutual dependence. Neither gender relations, nor socio-economic systems can be studied as isolated phenomenon.
The example above also shows that the changes of gender relations – in the form of gendered wages – took place under the pressure from other social relations external to gender relations. The gendered “living wage” did not represent a break with traditional, pre-capitalist gender relations. Instead it forwarded traditional notions of gender into the emerging capitalist society. Only when it was a hindrance to the development of the new socio-economic relations, market forces compelled changes in gender relations. These changes involved improvements for women and represented steps away from their formal subordination in the household. The worker’s wage was no longer related to men’s and women’s position in the household, but to their position as workers in the labour market. Women gained more freedom through raised wages and therefore more economic independence. This meant steps toward less male power over women in the household and a changing balance of power between women and men.

In this process of change and maintaining of gender relations the individuals, men and women, played the crucial roles. This is obvious in the process of transition from “living wage” to “incentive payment”. It was the single engineers, involved in time and motion studies, who bound by their own experience of gender relations of that time but also by their own gendered body that were incapable to transcend their own limits. At the same time they were forced to create changes in work organization to reduce the cost of labour. Through their actions, directed toward other women and men, they both upheld and changed gender relations with consequences for everybody involved.

Power as a social force is expressed by these actions. My critique against Hirdman’s two patterns in the gender system and the location of male gender power to the hierarchy, as a universal entity, is based on this interpretation. Power is exercised by single individuals in specific historical situations. The engineers described above exercised male power but nevertheless through their actions they contributed to a decreased male power and liberation of women from traditional subordination – even if the changes were subtle. The male power was not absolute, it was situated, and should therefore be analysed accordingly.

In the discussion in this paper, I have tried to focus on the complex processes which generate a certain kind of gender relations; that gender relations are deeply embedded in the social structures of society, that elements of earlier historical societies are forwarded by the actions of men and women to the following ones, but I have also focused on how slow the process of change is.

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