The Swedish reformist labor movement of the twentieth century constitutes a success story. A strong Social Democratic Party—Socialdemokratiska arbetarpartiet (SAP)—and high union density paved the way for an extensive and comprehensive welfare state and diminishing wage inequality. One key component of the dominance of Swedish social democracy was the labor movement’s extraordinary ability to mobilize the majority of the working class early on in its mission. In what may have been the most challenging period for social democracy—the interwar period—reformist labor organizations managed to establish reformism and a unique spirit of negotiation on a broad basis, thereby creating a cohesive movement. Why did the reformist branch receive such widespread support when other European labor movements were riven by internal disputes? It is inarguable that in the aftermath of the First World War, Europe was swept by a wave of labor movement radicalization. The war, which itself had mobilized mass protests, particularly by left-wing groups, challenged social democracy, as social democratic parties had accepted democracy and therefore often cooperated with bourgeois governments during the war. Internal disputes arose from ideological splits in the labor movement. The orthodox Marxism advocated by Karl Kautsky and the German Social Democrats (Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands; SPD) was criticized for its passivity, with criticism coming from the revisionists, of whom Eduard Bernstein was the main proponent, and the revolutionary branch, headed by Vladimir I. Lenin. Both argued that Marx and Engels’s predictions of the capitalist system’s imminent breakdown and the predetermined takeover by
the masses were not going to come true. There were no signs of a breakdown of the capitalist system. In that case, they queried, should workers simply wait for history to take its course, or should positive action be taken?

The recession that followed the war and resulted in high unemployment hit most European countries hard and fostered radical proposals for how to bring about socialism. New left-wing factions arose and challenged social democracy, questioning its ability to realize socialism. Other less prudent and more rapid approaches suddenly appealed to the workers. It became harder for the more moderate reformist labor movement to attract the masses because revolution appeared to be a quick fix for achieving socialism.

Amid this situation, in 1917, the radical left wing of the Russian labor movement under the leadership of Lenin transformed revolutionary slogans into reality. The Russian Revolution, which embodied a radical revision of Marxism, changed the labor movement on a global scale and sparked radicalization. This long-awaited revolution acted as a rallying point for radical groups. Shortly afterward, inspired by the events in Russia, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, following Lenin’s lead, attempted to start a revolution in war-torn Germany in 1919. The Spartakusbund was brutally crushed by the army, as sanctioned by the SPD, creating an unbridgeable cleavage between the social democrats and left-wing Germans. The failure of Luxemburg’s revolutionary efforts was only one of many such failures to come.

The revolutionary ideas emanating from the Russian Revolution provoked counteractions from right-wing parties and conservatives. In Italy, the labor movement’s radicalization after the war resulted in numerous strikes and eventually paved the way for the Fascists and Mussolini to seize power (Bell 1984; Berman 2006, 126–30). In Austria, the radicalization of the labor movement, which had been strong and stable, resulted in a dictatorship when Engelbert Dollfuss took charge in 1933 (Cronin 1980; Wasserman 2014). In Spain, several socialist parties struggled for power. When the socialist coalition Frente Popular came into power in 1936, it pursued a range of reforms, provoking a counter-revolution that brought General Franco to power (Lapuente and Rothstein 2014). Many other examples follow the same pattern. After 1917, the labor movement split between communists, social democrats, and syndicalists. In the worst instances, backlash to radicalization resulted in dictatorships or authoritarian governments, whereas in cases such as France (Bartolini 2000, 107–8) it weakened the labor movement considerably. Instead of fighting together against the Right and the capitalist class, the communists, social democrats, and syndicalists fought with each other, wasting resources and energy, making it difficult to influence politics and in the long run to effectively mobilize the working class.
Like the other European labor movements, the labor movement in Sweden radicalized. The trade union movement in Sweden split in 1910 when a radical faction broke loose and formed a syndicalist organization, the Sveriges Arbetares Centralorganisation (SAC). Support for the syndicalist movement spread in the reformist organizations, and the radical measures advocated by the SAC in labor market conflicts resulted in turbulent industrial relations. In 1903–29, Sweden had the highest rate of strikes among thirteen Western industrial countries (Shorter and Tilly 1974, 333). In 1917, the next setback for the reformist labor movement arrived. The SAP, in which different factions had coexisted, split into two parties when the youth organization decided to go its own way and founded what a few years later would become the Communist Party. These events all pointed in the same direction: Sweden was heading down the same road as the rest of Europe, toward a divided labor movement in which factions would fight each other rather than join forces against employers and right-wing political parties.

History then took another turn. The labor movement in Sweden became strong—in fact, one of the strongest in the world—and cohesive. The left-wing factions fought the reformists for twenty years but were finally defeated and marginalized. The Swedish Trade Union Confederation (Landsorganisationen, LO) concluded a landmark labor market peace agreement, the Saltsjöbaden Agreement (Saltsjöbadsavtalet, also called the Basic Agreement), with the Swedish Employers’ Association (Svenska arbetsgivareföreningen, SAF) in Saltsjöbaden in 1938, effectively ending industrial relations conflicts. The primary principle of the parties involved became negotiation, and Swedish labor market practices came to symbolize the ultimate in cross-class cooperation. The outcome of Sweden’s strong, cohesive labor movement was the dominance of the Social Democratic Party, which remained in power for forty-four consecutive years, and a trade union movement with the power needed to improve working conditions, reduce the wage gap, and promote the construction of a comprehensive Swedish welfare state. This Swedish developmental path exemplifies a different outcome than that where there was a weak, split labor movement, as in France, or where there was counteraction by right-wing and fascist parties, as in Italy and Spain. The Swedish perspective therefore presents an interesting case for international comparison, not simply because the labor movement chose reformism. All European countries had social democratic organizations and reformist trade unions, so Sweden is not unique in this regard. What made the Swedish reformist labor movement extraordinary was its ability to engage a majority of the workers in its mission. The movement managed to establish reformism and a unique spirit of consensus on a broad basis. Why did the
Swedish reformist branch receive such widespread support when other European labor movements were riven by internal conflict?

**Constructing a Reformist Working Class**

The radicalization of the European labor movement created unbridgeable gaps in the working class. This was the case in Sweden, where the 1938 labor market peace agreement that was reached in Saltsjöbaden is still referred to as a “class betrayal” by some groups. The fragmentation was particularly acute, in the trade union movement because the unions were open to anyone, regardless of party membership. Workers who supported the Social Democratic Left Party, and later the Communist Party, were welcome as members of the LO. Moreover, the SAC had steadily grown in strength during the 1910s and was becoming a realistic alternative to the reformist unions. The SAC advocated radical measures to fight capitalism, which led to an extraordinary number of industrial conflicts. Many of the conflicts that the SAC started were supported by LO members through sympathy strikes. By the end of the 1930s, LO members were largely devoted to the aims of the reformist labor movement, paving the way for class compromise and the welfare state. In the late 1910s, however, it was certainly not a foregone conclusion which path the Swedish labor movement would take, and a split and consequently weakened labor movement was a very distinct possibility. Ninety years later it is now clear that the reformist branch decisively won the day, but it is far too simplistic to dismiss the influence of the left-wing organizations over the Swedish labor movement. This post hoc perspective causes many to overlook the struggle that took place in the labor movement, particularly the struggle to unite the working class under the reformist ideology in the union movement. The series of events that led to the Swedish working class uniting under this banner should not be overlooked.

This book presents the idea that the missing link in understanding the cohesive and reformist union movement in Sweden is the movement’s formation of a coherent self-image. This process was initiated by means of a conscious strategy on the part of the LO leaders. Fighting the left wing and establishing cohesiveness in the movement were done by explaining to the members in particular, and to the working class in general, what kind of organization the LO was. LO leaders constructed a collective identity based on the reformist ideology, and this self-image was disseminated among its members through an educational program arranged by the labor movement—so-called popular education. Identity in class organizations, or in any organization, is not brought about by structures but is constructed by actors. Moreover, the content of self-image in a class organization is not predetermined, and the kind of self-image a labor movement
The reformist choice possesses affects its scope of action. Identity is thus the missing link in efforts to fully understand the strength of the Swedish union movement and, in particular, the trait for which the Swedish labor movement is widely renowned: the spirit of consensus. The construction of a cohesive labor organization was a reformation of working-class consciousness. An organizational identity that downplayed class struggle and embraced negotiation was constructed by the LO leaders, and the image of the LO, as defined by that leadership, was impressed on the members through the LO’s popular education programs. The importance of identity politics in the Swedish labor movement during the interwar decades is closely examined here through a series of linked arguments; four claims are accordingly developed and investigated in this book.

The first claim is that the LO leadership recognized the problems arising from conflict among left-wing organizations as identity problems. Of course, the emergence of left-wing organizations constituted a threat to the notion of “worker.” Suddenly, there were not only workers but different kinds of workers, who were promoting communism and syndicalism as well as reformism. The link between class structure and the sense of “we” became blurred. Not only did it become more complicated to distinguish who belonged to the “we” and who were “the others,” there were also implications for the enforcement of socialist ideology. From the perspective of social identity theory, a challenge such as the emergence of left-wing organizations constituted a delicate dilemma for the reformist labor movement. The mobilization of workers in unions had been accomplished through struggle against employers, but the struggle was suddenly no longer a joint effort involving all workers. Instead, there were different kinds of workers fighting different battles. The central idea of solidarity became harder to grasp for the working class: With whom did one’s loyalties lie? Who are “we,” and who are “the others”? The emergence of left-wing organizations and the implications of these organizations (e.g., labor market conflicts) sparked an identity crisis among the reformist organizations. The first claim made in this work is that the LO leadership perceived the left-wing organizations as a threat to the identity of their organization.

The second claim concerns the construction of a cohesive collective identity as the result of strategic action. Identity does not simply come into being, precipitated by social structures; it needs to be produced by actors. In response to the recognized problems associated with the left-wing factions, the LO leadership decided to construct an organizational identity using popular education. Through this reformation of its identity, the LO distinguished itself from the left-wing organizations. The second claim accordingly examines whether or not the LO leadership had a plan for how to deal with the disjointed organization, including the use of popular education.
This leads to the third claim: that a particular type of organizational self-image was constructed by LO leaders and presented in the materials used in the popular education programs. This image embodied a reformist ideology in which negotiations as a means of conflict resolution were crucial. Indeed, the phenomenon referred to as the “spirit of consensus” was the LO’s way of transforming the theoretical ideas of reformism into actual viable union work. This spirit of consensus was in fact present in the educational material of LO long before the 1938 Basic Agreement was concluded.

The final claim made in this book is that the educational material used by the LO became diffused throughout the labor movement because the approach that the LO leaders chose—popular education—reached the mass
of the workers. Education was central to all socialist theorists. Marx, Lenin, and, above all, Gramsci proclaimed the importance of workers controlling their own education: as long as education is controlled and conducted by bourgeois institutions, bourgeois values will be reproduced. The idea of offering education was not new, although the union movement had not hitherto made much use of it. It is in this context that the implementation of popular education in the labor movement is further examined. The available empirical evidence regarding the scope and depth of the LO’s popular education provides a substantive indication of its impact. The remainder of this chapter is devoted to clarifying the theoretical point of departure of the proposed thesis and of its four claims (figure 1.1).

**Leaders and Identity, and Class Formation**

Together the four claims made above underpin this book’s argument about identity politics in the Swedish labor movement in the 1920s and 1930s. Examining these claims not only allows a broader understanding of the Swedish case but also has much wider implications. This focus on identity offers a new perspective and merits consideration in two respects.

First, identity is often assumed to exist in class organizations as a matter of course. This is characteristic of the class formation literature, which has been very influenced by Marxism and its determinism. The actor tends to be either ignored or represented as powerless. One possible reason for this is the unclear description of how class consciousness comes into being. According to Marx, class consciousness implies, first, that the workers realize they have common interests and, second, that they identify themselves as members of the working class (Marx 1981, 186). Class formation as the process by which a class in itself becomes a class for itself puts struggle at the center of the analysis, as struggle triggers class formation. The struggle appears to be an effect of the exploitation of the wage-earning class by the capitalist class. Exploitation is, in turn, an effect of the capitalist system. Marx never elaborated more detailed descriptions of the causes of class consciousness. There is a substantial literature on understanding the formation of class consciousness, but very few studies concentrate on the role of labor leaders in this process. The “structuralist school” treated the class formation process as deterministic, considering that the making of a class in itself inevitably leads to the spontaneous appearance of a class for itself (Balibar 1979, 267; Kuczynski, Österling, and Österling 1967, 52–53, 90–94) or that the consciousness of belonging to a class will automatically appear. The driving force of class formation, however, came from production. Such structural explanations often focus on technical developments and
on the process of production (see, for instance, Burawoy 1982) as the independent variable—to put it in methodological terms. The British historian E. P. Thompson launched an important criticism of the Marxist structuralist view, claiming that lived experience was the most crucial variable in the class formation process (Thompson 1979, 9–10, 212–16). Thompson explained class formation by paying attention to the life situation of the working class. The shared life situation of the working class was due to the economic structures in class society; however, political and cultural elements were necessary for the class to be “made.” Thompson’s explanation did not present an independent variable for understanding class formation that differed from that presented by the structuralists; rather, it presented a mechanism for understanding why the emergence of the working class could lead to collective action (Somers 1992). Further developments along the same lines have been made by Katznelson. Neither Katznelson (Katznelson 1986) nor Somers (Somers 1992) theorizes about or analyzes the role of labor leaders, however.

The so-called linguistic turn criticized structural theorists for endorsing Marxist determinism. Whereas Thompson assumed that structural class came first and was consequently the driving force of class development, scholars of the linguistic turn claimed that language must come before class, experience, or culture, as these phenomena could not possibly exist without a language to express them. According to this school of thought, class was a discursive phenomenon (August 2011, 5; Jones 1984, 7–8; Steinberg 1999, 14–21). Researchers considering language, on the other hand, advocated another kind of structure by empowering language. Discourses empower or constrain actions, so language became the decisive factor determining the actions of workers; however, the actors were given little power over the formulation and articulation of their discourses. In contrast, this study highlights labor leaders’ role in constructing identities through building on social identity and organizational theory, thereby bringing a new perspective to the field of class formation.

The second major contribution of this study relates to its focus on organizational identity. Self-perception and self-definitions are constructed by what researchers call social identities. In simple terms, people classify themselves and others in their environment in terms of various categories (Tajfel 1981, 31, 45–49). Social identities are a person’s perceived group affiliations—that is, “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate” (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 21). Individuals always have a range of group affiliations, such as gender, being a father, being a member of an association, or simply listening to a certain type of music or wearing a certain style of jeans. “The basic idea is that a social category (for example, nationality, political affiliation or sports team) into which one falls, and to which one feels one belongs, provides a definition of who
one is in terms of the defining characteristics of the category—a self-definition that is part of the self-concept” (Hogg, Terry, and White 1995, 259).

Categorization serves two purposes. It creates order for the individual in the social environment by giving him or her tools for systematically defining others, and it allows the individual to locate himself or herself in the social environment. In other words, the self is defined by defining others. Since the processes of defining others also helps to define the self, social identities are relational. The definition of the self depends on the definition of others (those whom one is not), and vice versa (Ashforth and Mael 1989, 21). Tajfel demonstrated the importance of group identities in a series of experiments, in which the participants defined themselves as members of a group that had no significance whatsoever other than its not being a certain other group (Tajfel 1981). Social identities are therefore crucial to individuals, which is why there is power in identity.

Members who identify strongly with an organization are a force the organization can count on and use, making identity crucial for organizations as well. Organizations easily become the reference point for social identities because they have clear boundaries, making it easy to categorize the self and others (i.e., as members versus nonmembers). If members identify with an organization, they are more likely to work and make sacrifices for it; identity thus constitutes the glue that keeps the organization together (Pichardo 1997; Ravasi and Schultz 2006; Stryker 2000; Tyler and Blader 2001). This is particularly important in social movement organizations since membership is voluntary and seldom confers material benefits. Members are also less likely to stay within a social movement organization when the identification is weak. Identity should therefore be considered a power resource because social identities constitute prerequisites for collective action (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2010, chapters 3 and 6). This is also true for class organizations, even though class research has paid little attention to identity as a power resource.

More importantly, the nature of an organization’s identity affects how its members and leaders act. Indeed, the content of the identity limits the actions that members and leaders may take. For example, as long as workers’ self-perception included being part of a radical class struggle in which employers were viewed as enemies and workers were contentious and unwilling to back down in conflicts with their employers, cooperation with employers was very difficult. The content of an organization’s identity—comprising the characteristic features of an organization—is decisive for the scope of actions that can be undertaken, because identity creates a logic of appropriateness (March and Olsen 2004), setting limits on what are considered acceptable and unacceptable actions for the organization and its members. Identity can therefore be a means of creating and maintaining discipline in an organization. Class identity has often been assumed
to be the given identification of union members, though there are reasons to question this claim. Treating identity as something that “just exists” or “just appears,” and that is defined by social structures, tends to assume that there is only one kind of working-class identity. However, each and every class organization has specific traits, and these traits affect the organization’s scope of action, its options, and, more importantly, its ability to mobilize the working class. The argument outlined in this book is that class identity may cause trouble for class organizations when different kinds of class organizations appear. In such situations, it may be necessary to change the content and to stress traits other than merely structural ones in order to mobilize workers in a particular union; in other words, it may be necessary to construct an organizational identity. This is why leaders have an important task in the class formation process. In such processes, when the leaders discern a need to change—to re-form—the identity of an organization, they will formulate strategies on how that can be done and will act as identity entrepreneurs.

Labor Leaders as Identity Entrepreneurs

It has been claimed that labor leaders play a crucial role in the process of mobilizing workers because they can affect the framing of political issues, articulate grievances, and promote group cohesion (Kelly 1998, 34–38). In his famous book The New Men of Power, C. Wright Mills stated that labor leaders need to be “managers of discontent”: they need not only be rebels against employers but also to manage rebellions within the labor movement (Mills 1948). In other words, the leaders have the task of creating cohesiveness within their movement. How does this work? Wholly understanding how leaders can be identity entrepreneurs or managers of discontent requires a detailed examination of leaders’ role in organizations. What role does the leadership play in organizations? What functions do leaders have? What tasks are they assigned?

In general, the leadership in political organizations is crucial for several reasons. Leaders have executive power in the organization, for one, and they have an important role in solving collective action problems, mobilizing resources, and developing strategies (Morris and Staggenborg 2004; Nepstad and Bob 2006; Rothstein 1998). Because the leadership is assigned to manage the organization and make everyday decisions, it has the power to determine the development of the organization. The organization’s executive body also possesses the tools to communicate with the members. It enjoys authority—or at least it should—and therefore has the prerogative to define the organization. Moreover, the leaders’ version of the organization’s identity is an image that is transmitted to both members and nonmembers. The leaders thus represent the organization both
internally and externally, in a sense symbolizing the organization. Because leadership actions are monitored by members and stakeholders, the leaders’ image of the organization can be manifested in a range of ways: how they talk about the organization, what logo they choose, how they act, who they choose to cooperate with, and so on. This study claims that leaders are identity entrepreneurs because their position in the organization gives them the tools needed to define and activate identity. Leaders seek to construct and promote a particular version of organizational identity that suits their aims, and they do so by using their position in the organization to define who belongs to the in-group, who are the nonmembers, what problems and opportunities the organization is facing, and what characteristic traits are ascribed to the organization—that is, the content of the identity (Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2010, chapter 6).

Social identity theory emphasizes the importance of the social context for social identities (Tajfel and Turner 2004). Identity is not static; rather, various contextual factors can affect whether or not a certain social identity is perceived as important for a group of individuals. Research has recognized that certain social identities are stronger than others, but there are no definite answers as to why that is so. For example, it has been pointed out that some ethnic groups do not develop a strong ethnic identity even though the structural prerequisites for doing so exist (Huddy 2001, 130–31). This may be because different settings activate different identities, so self-categorization changes between situations (Huddy 2001, 134). If individuals have several group identities, with one being superordinate to the others (e.g., workers in Sweden were not only workers but also artisans, parents, members of the temperance movement, church members, etc.), this implies that the primary one has somehow been activated. Marxist structural theories suggest that class structure activates the social identity of the “worker” (making class structure the most fundamental social structure).

In contrast, this study proposes that organizations can play a crucial role in activating a particular social identity. By their mere existence, organizations create an “us” and a “them” through their membership; if organization leaders are perceived as prototypical of the specific social identity that they share with their followers (the members), and if the leaders manage to put that identity into a context that is understandable to the members, then the leaders can indeed be active identity entrepreneurs (Haslam and Reicher 2007, 126). From this perspective, contextual factors not only include institutions, such as the industrial production process or the language used to express class, but also relationships with other humans. In this way, leaders of organizations can play a crucial role in identity formation processes. Labor leaders are in an advantageous position that empowers them to activate and articulate identity in the organization; they also have a position that allows them to construct the content of the identity.
According to this argument, the leaders’ way of talking about the organization, and how they carry themselves as leaders, will make an impression on the members. If the leaders realize this, they can then use their position as identity entrepreneurs to promote a certain image of the organization.

The actor’s role in identity formation is ultimately a matter of how identities are produced. This inevitably raises a number of important questions. Does this mean that the leadership stands “outside” the organization? Does the leadership possess the ability to look at the organization in a way that is completely detached from the prevailing organizational culture and identity? The answer to these questions is no. The leaders are not unaffected by culture and identity, and they have cultural awareness that constrains what they do, both consciously and unconsciously (i.e., they will sometimes be aware that they are acting in accordance with certain social norms and cultures existing in the organization, and sometimes will be unaware of doing so). Once a “we” has been established, future changes must take that as the point of departure; in other words, leaders are at least partly bound by the sense of “we” already existing in an organization. If the leaders attempt to launch a new image of the organization that differs too much from the old one, members can become alienated. Leaders’ maneuvering room is therefore restricted. However, in some situations, they will be able to manage identity strategically. In the case presented in this book, the values and attitudes of the labor movement leadership were reformist (i.e., the Swedish labor movement was reformist), whereas the members had shifted toward radicalized values. The construction of a reformist identity did not lie outside the cultural institutions in which the leadership was located; rather, it was a defense of the movement’s identity as the leaders defined it.

The advantageous position of leaders in an organization facilitates their management of identity formation by establishing a certain image. Labor leaders have incentives to re-form the identity of their movement strategically. Once labor organizations are formed, a logic of organization guides their actions. A labor organization acts not only based on the logic of the social situation that mobilized the working class but also in accordance with the interests of the organization as such. The overriding interest is assumed to be survival (for similar argument, see Rothstein 1987). The interests of any labor organization will primarily be advocated by its leaders, because they have a different organizational position from that of the members—namely, one with executive powers. The leaders may also have other visions and goals than do the members because of their position. They will doubtless possess more information about the various parts of the organization and about the strategies of other organizations. Last, trade union leaders can be expected to have more frequent contact with employers than does the average trade union member, which probably affects
the leaders’ perception of the employers. For these reasons, it is reasonable to assume that the labor leadership will often uphold ideas less radical than those of the members. It is not that the leadership elite stands to gain materially from taking a reformist line; rather, an inherited logic of formal organizational development tends to create an elite that acts in accordance with the primary interest of the organization—namely, its survival. Therefore, organizational logic can lead to discrepancies between the radical, ideologically driven members and the leaders. In fact, organizational logic entails a dilemma for labor leaders. As Mills put it, leaders are not only agitators who mobilize resistance; they also need to manage rebellions within the movement (Mills 1948, 8–9, my italics) and oversee the survival of the organization. How labor leaders handle such situations is of the utmost importance for the organization’s development and is the focus of this book.

Internal Education: Means of Managing Identification

What means of identity formation are available to labor leadership? Identity as a means of organizational control has so far received relatively little attention in contemporary research, and even less research has explored how identity formation processes can be strategically managed (Alvesson and Willmott 2002). However, most research into self-perception and identity formation emphasizes the role of discourse. Discourse plays a crucial role in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of the characteristic traits ascribed to the organization that constitute the core of its identity. Therefore, managing identity should supposedly be done by establishing or changing the discourse. Most of the time, the leadership of an organization “manages continuity,” upholding and maintaining the organization’s dominant self-perception. Nevertheless, the leadership sometimes alters an organization’s identity. Identity management can be done in a number of ways: by defining members in terms of their names and the attributes of their positions in the organization, by defining others, by defining the context in which the organization works, or by establishing a specific framework for interpreting the work of the organization and, through that lens, making sense of the organization’s actions. Other ways of managing identity include explicating morals and values, and establishing a distinct set of rules through which “norms about the ‘natural’ way of doing things” are established (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, 14). In institutional terms, this last way of controlling members through identity management is what March and Olsen (2004) called the “logic of appropriateness.” In other words, identification with an organization implies that some actions are sanctioned and compatible with the role of the member, whereas other actions are unsuitable: “Actors seek to fulfill the obligations encapsulated
in a role, an identity, a membership in a political community or group, and the ethos, practices and expectations of its institutions” (March and Olsen 2004, 3). Members can therefore be controlled by establishing a web of norms serving as guidance for decision-making. According to the thesis presented in this book, such a web of norms is what the LO leaders wanted to create.

What are the best ways of managing identity formation in an organization? In what institutional settings is top-down identity construction most likely to work? This study suggests that internal educational programs constitute a forum in which identity formation takes place. There are several reasons to believe that education programs had an impact on workers in Sweden. First, trade union education offered a perfect opportunity for the leaders of the labor movement organization to communicate their definitions and views of social problems, class struggle, and the aims of the labor movement to members. In other words, internal education constituted a suitable setting for managing the organizational self-image. This was not only true for the labor leaders in the 1920s but is also true for organizational leaders in general. By privileging some themes over others in workers’ education, leaders could influence what was taught, thereby producing and reproducing certain ideological ideas. The popular education system, moreover, constituted an excellent means of disseminating ideas to the rank and file. Study activities intended to educate and enlighten the rank and file provided a forum where labor leaders, because they could control and design the study activities, could reach a wide range of the membership. The means of communicating with members were fewer in the 1920s than they are today, and workers’ education was one of the few channels of direct communication. This approach was not unique to 1920s labor leaders in Sweden. Education as a means of inculcating specific ideologies and perceptions of society has been noted by most socialist theorists.

Whoever controlled what was taught in the education programs could influence the ideology of the movement. In particular, courses on “trade union studies” or “the history of the labor movement” constituted good opportunities to plant ideas about “who we are” among members at the grassroots level, since these courses concentrated on what trade unions are and do. A coherent image of the aim and ideology of the movement also functioned as a glue or binding agent among workers around the country. By transmitting the same image of what it meant to be a worker through education programs across the country, the Swedish working class could be encouraged to think along the same lines, which is a precondition for cohesiveness in a movement. Content could thus breed solidarity, and controlling the content of education affected the kind of working-class consciousness that developed. Moreover, since workers’ education challenges members to contemplate such issues as class, the labor movement, and
the position of workers in society, identity formation in these settings was clearly connected to class identity.

A second reason for the success of this popular education was the broader education system in Sweden, both formal (i.e., compulsory schooling) and popular. Although the level of education in the 1920s was rather low compared with that of today, Sweden had a longer tradition of compulsory schooling than did other countries in the 1920s. The compulsory *folkskola* was established in the mid-nineteenth century and offered a six-year education. The effect of the school reform of 1842 was a high literacy rate. The *folkskola* also cut its bond with the church, which had been the major educational institution in the past. Literacy was a prerequisite for the education programs of the labor movement, simply because the workers had to be able to read the materials produced by the LO. Parallel to the formal education system, Sweden’s major social movements of the nineteenth century—the temperance movement and the Free Church movement—established a system of popular education, an approach later adopted by the labor movement. When the LO implemented its educational strategy in the 1920s, study activities were already an accepted and established element of working-class culture, and they had been so since the late nineteenth century. Moreover, libraries founded and run by the temperance movement already existed all over Sweden. Because higher formal education entailed fees, few workers could extend their education beyond the six years of free compulsory school. As a result, the popular education programs offered by the trade unions and the temperance movement were the only chances of further education for most members of the working class. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the participants took such education seriously. It was seen as an opportunity and an honor for adults to obtain further education.

Third, education programs encouraged identity formation as much by their form as by their content. The popular education system in Sweden, which was inspired by Grundtvig, featured informal learning (Eraut 2004; Eshach 2007). Popular education was a process of learning and teaching (B. Andersson 1980, 19); it was “free and voluntary,” and its prime teaching method was the study circle. The study circle, possibly the most important legacy of the temperance movement, constituted small reading groups. The ideal circles of temperance movement activist Oscar Olsson did not have teachers, and the chair of the meetings rotated among the participants. According to Olsson, assuming the role of the chair was a learning experience in itself, and this was supposed to maintain the nonhierarchical and democratic characteristics of the circles (Törnqvist 1996, 26–30). “Free and voluntary” meant that no one could force study circle participants to study a particular subject. Although they were encouraged to study certain subjects, participants were free to choose subjects on their own.
Study circles were also voluntary in that participation was based solely on the participant’s desire to learn (Gustavsson and Wiklund 2013, 7–11). There are reasons to believe that small educational settings focusing on discussions and deliberation are more likely to promote the development of a sense of “we” than, for example, are teaching methods such as lectures or teacher-led seminars (Jansson 2016). Research into the impact of study circle activities on participants in recent times suggests that the participants perceive the circles as helping deepen their interest in the subject of study, and as building fellowship among participants, bolstering self-esteem, and improving social skills. The circles also helped to develop and embrace “citizens’ values,” which include forming and expressing personal opinions and arguing for them in the group, taking responsibility, and making decisions collectively (E. Andersson et al. 1996, 65–66). There are reasons to assume that these various forms of workers’ education attended by workers from the local community created a sense of belonging. In such educational settings, the participants often worked together or belonged to the same union section or political organization, and the intimate study situation ought to have created group identity at a very local level of the labor movement. Moreover, the identification process that occurred during study activities should have been transferable into solidarity in other arenas. Compared with lectures, in which the participants only sat and listened, nonhierarchical and interactive study activities such as the study circle ought to have had a more profound impact on identity formation.

The thesis of the identity entrepreneur—and its theoretical underpinnings as presented here—guides this book’s empirical analysis of the leadership of the Swedish trade union movement during the challenging interwar decades. The remainder of this book is an empirical analysis of the thesis and of the four claims made above, with each claim discussed in its own chapter. Chapter 2 presents the background to the development of the Swedish labor movement in the 1910s and defines the problems perceived by the LO leadership—that is, the Secretariat. The chapter demonstrates that the vigorous left-wing organizations constituted a real problem for the reformist labor movement. More importantly, these left-wing organizations were perceived as a problem for the leadership of the LO. Both how the executive body of LO (the Secretariat) talked about other organizations and how it acted indicate that syndicalists and communists were perceived to be a major problem or even threat. Chapter 3 examines solutions to this problem, to determine whether there is reason to believe that the LO leadership strategically attempted to construct an organizational identity, and whether popular education was used to change the self-perception of the organization among its members. Next, the organizational self-image conveyed by LO’s educational
materials is analyzed. The theory presented here states not only that identity in organizations can be formed from above but also that the identity constructed in this case had certain characteristics. What kind of image this was and the content of this constructed identity are therefore crucial questions for the argument presented here. Chapter 4 analyzes the identity of LO. Chapter 5 examines the fourth claim—namely, that implementation of the popular educational strategy succeeded in reaching most of the workers. Popular education at the national and local levels is analyzed, with the town of Skutskär serving as a specific case. Finally, causality is discussed by considering what conclusions can be drawn from analyzing the union activities and the education provided in Skutskär. Conclusions are then presented and discussed in chapter 6.