Recasting Swedish Historical Identity

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Abstract

That the concept of Swedish identity and its relation to Swedish history is deeply problematic has become increasingly obvious over the last few years. Several books, articles and a TV series have been devoted to such questions. In this article the problem is discussed within the context of two contrasting standpoints: on the one hand a Romanticist nationalist construction of an 'ancient racial community' (a myth recently dissected by Maja Hagerman), and on the other, an identification with the present and the future, rather than with the past. This tendency has been characteristic of the Swedish welfare society, and here it is discussed in connection with Berggren-Trägårdh's analysis of the specifically Swedish combination of radical individualism and a strong reliance on the state.

Within this context different interpretations of the 'People's home' (folkhem) ideal are discussed, and different attitudes to immigration. The article concludes that if the dynamics of Europe depend on its diversity, then every national peculiarity may be seen as a contribution to these dynamics. In the Swedish case: an acceptance of perpetual change, a moderate rate of inequality, a deep aversion to warfare, a tradition of constant negotiation and an ambition to search for points of consensus.

Recasting Swedish historical identity

In a country which has transformed itself from one of the poorest countries of Europe, to one of the richest; from an extremely militarized society to a world record holder in unbroken peace, and from a draconically enforced religious conformity to an almost complete secularization[1] – in such a country we should not be surprised to notice a lack of consensus about national identity, about what it means to be Swedish.

In this article the recently reawakened interest in such questions is discussed in the context of two competing traditions.

During the later part of the 20th century – and in some respects already from the 30's – Swedish nationalism tended to become a less and less fashionable subject. The programmatic modernism and international reputation of the Swedish welfare state encouraged a focus on the present and the future, rather than the past, and on the international context rather than the internal. Despite the rather low intensity of

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[1] Sweden as a case of extreme modernization is discussed in Emilsson: Sweden and the European Miracles: Conquest, Growth and Voice. Göteborg 1996:10-14.

nationalist discourse, Sweden was regularly cited as one of the few real-life examples of the nation-state ideal before the post-communist resurgence of national separatism in Europe[2].

Are we then to conclude that Sweden's national homogeneity was so self-evident that it was unnecessary to assert? And that the absence of nationality problems was a precondition for identifying with modernity?

Not really. Nationalist ideas had flourished throughout and beyond Sweden's 19th century, and the modernist paradigm won out only slowly. There are still traces of an unconscious or at least unspoken nationalism in the ways many Swedes view the world. If you are convinced that you really live in the best country in the world it would be tactless to spell it out.

Also, on such a subliminal level of discrete nationalism old national myths have been able to survive unexamined. And if we start to examine them, homogeneity may appear much less self-evident. I will presently return to these aspects.

After Sweden's hesitant and somewhat reluctant entry into the European Communities – and likewise as a consequence of international migration – we have been more closely confronted with people having a much more explicit and assertive relationship with their historical pasts. This has – at long last – forced us to begin reconsidering Swedish history and Swedish national identity. In the last year[3], several books, articles and an ambitious TV series have been devoted to questions of national identity and related issues.

During the later 1990's the resurgence of interest in Swedish history was becoming obvious. When history had disappeared from the list of compulsory school subjects within Swedish secondary education in 1991, this had only been the final step in a long devaluation of history as an item of social necessity[4]. At least from the Stockholm exhibition in 1930, and even more so after the publication of Marquis Childs' book *Sweden: the Middle Way* in 1936, Sweden had begun to enjoy a growing international reputation as the homeland of modernity – 'the country that shows the rest of the world what the future will be like', to quote a once popular American cliché.

If a nation is an 'imagined community' in Benedict Anderson's famous expression[5], Sweden's collective imagination had by this time turned its focus onto the present and the future, rather than on its past. The conservative nationalist tradition that had grown in strength throughout the 19th century did not give in easily, but the identification with modernity proved to be more attractive in the long run, at least until Sweden started to drop from its taken-for-granted top positions in international ranking lists of economic performance, political stability and high living standards. Paradoxically, the high scientific standards of a newer generation of Swedish historians challenging the conservative nationalist historians during the interwar period, ultimately may have served to undermine the public interest in history. Their dedication to uncompromising source-criticism led them to undertake a severe

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[2] Normally six to eight countries used to be mentioned, including Iceland, Portugal and Albania.
[3] This was writtwn in early 2007.
[4] The devaluation of the history subject is described in Hans Albin Larsson: 'Consigning history to the past.' Axess Magazine 2006.
[5] Benedict Anderson: Imagined Communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism. London 1983.

deconstruction of national mythologies, but the paucity of early historical sources in Sweden made large parts of Swedish history look like empty gaps after their revisions. A lacklustre history was no match for a glorious present.

In the early 19th century, when Swedish nationalism had taken shape, the situation had been quite the reverse. A lacklustre present was compensated for through glorifying the past.

Today, when we are faced with the necessity of a thorough reappraisal of our latent national myths, it is to their point of formulation we have to return.

When modern nationalisms were being constructed in the early 19th century, they were needed to solve quite different versions of the national identity problem. Where the French nation had to try and strike a balance between a recent revolutionary formulation of common citizenship, and the returning principle of dynastic legitimacy[6], the British had just been confirmed in their national pride and their self-image as international upholders of law and order. Within parts of Europe now clearly relegated to second-rank status, German and Italian nationalists were beginning to assert themselves on the basis of linguistic communities and dreams of resurrecting bygone empires. Influenced by Romantic German nationalism, young Swedish poets, journalists and historians embarked on a similar venture. But in a very different situation.

For the early German nationalists, the linguistic and cultural community they were striving for was, at the time, beyond their reach. Only very different political realities would later make a German nation-state a feasible project, but in the truncated Sweden a linguistic homogeneity which would have been unthinkable in the polyglot Swedish Empire had already entered the domain of possibility. However, this had come about not through victorious warfare (as when the German nation-state was finally realized, in 1871) but through defeat, and along with it the definitive loss of Great Power status. Therefore the bygone glory could be referred to only in very general terms, as they still are in the words of the national anthem, but any explicit nostalgia for the Imperial Age was evaded. The loss was still too painful. Instead these young nationalists returned to the faraway myths that had once occupied the imaginations of the Great Power kings: the distant Gothic origin claimed for the Swedish nation. Only this time the warlike Goths were imagined to be the ancestors not only of royal dynasties, or aristocracies, but of the peasantry as well. Here a new myth was taking shape, an ethnic as well as civic nationalism claiming a bond of shared bloodlines between lords and peasants, between kings and subjects.

This is a fiction that is still alive and kicking: the notion of a racially homogeneous population was over the 19th century turned into a pseudoscientific basis for Swedish national cohesion, and into an explanation of that Swedish tradition of personal freedom which is still treasured as a national heritage. How this came about is vividly described in Maja Hagerman's recent book: *Det rena landet. Konsten att uppfinna sina förfäder.* ("The pure country. The art of inventing one's ancestors.")

The poet-historian Erik Gustaf Geijer invented two national archetypes: the viking and the *odalbonde* (yeoman). Geijer's *odalbonde* is conceived as a hard-working small-

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[6] With the suddenly shattered dreams of forcibly leading the world into modernity thrown into the balance, it is no wonder that the better part of a century had to be spent in the effort.

scale self-owning peasant, proud and independent. He is envisioned as the backbone of Swedish society, in contrast to the impatient viking adventurer, who might yet have been his brother. That the strong political position of Sweden's peasantry can be explained as an unbroken heritage from the Viking Age, is pure myth. That peasants *did* have a stronger political position in Sweden than in other countries is no myth, though, but originally, land ownership had nothing to do with it. That their early civic status depended on land ownership, is a misconceived back projection from the 19th century. By that time, more than a century of market-oriented agriculture had finally segregated the peasantry into either proprietors or proletarians[7]. These are not Hagerman's arguments, however. She concentrates on the lack of archeological evidence of an egalitarian society, and on the construction of European racism, where, she shows, prominent Swedish scientists, historians and authors took an active and important part.

What, then, about the presumed racial homogeneity? Hagerman shows how archaeologists and anthropologists from a surprisingly narrow social circle – people who were each other's pupils or teachers, ate breakfasts together and married off their children to each other – succeeded to create an ideal image of Sweden as an Eden of racial purity[8]. This was achieved in a close dialogue with the international pioneers of racist theory, and eventually they succeeded to sell this idea to the Swedish public through museum exhibitions, encyclopedia articles and massive popular campaigns.

That Sweden became the first country to create an institute of Racial Biology was therefore no inexplicable aberration, but a measure of the success of the pure-blood lobby, and of their scientific prestige. Few people today would talk about a national treasure of unmixed Aryan blood, but the notion of Sweden's homogeneous population is by no means eradicated. For instance, I have quite recently been criticized in an international review by a Swedish professor for neglecting the importance of the homogeneity factor in my discussions of Swedish history within a comparative European context.

To evaluate the realism of the homogeneity notion, it is necessary to look even further back in history. To the extent that it is meaningful to talk of ethnic identity except in a quite subjective sense, there existed several different ethnic groups within the late 18th century Swedish realm. Even if we would surmise that patriotic propaganda and the uniquely efficient centralization of the early-modern Swedish state would by this time have succeeded in welding together the earlier regional identities – Westgothians, Dalecarlians, Smallanders, Northlanders and so on – into a unitary Swedish identity, there were also seven recently conquered provinces populated by Danes and Norwegians.

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[7] See my arguments in Emilsson: Before the 'European Miracles'. Four Studies in Swedish Preconditions for Conquest, Growth, and Voice. Göteborg 2005 and in 'Jordbrukets kommersialisering och splittringen av bondeståndet – en uppgörelse med odalbondemyten' (Forthcoming article in Forskningsfronten flyttas fram 2007).

[8] The evidence invoked largely consisted of cranimetric statistics interpreted as indications of language-group affinities; in this way prominent Swedish archaeologists and historians could claim to have proved the descent of contemporaneous Swedes from stone-age Germanic ancestors. As the databases were manipulated to exclude 'untypical' skulls at both ends of the time spectrum, the similarities are hardly surprising.

Today these provinces are considered totally Swedish, but by the time Geijer and his associates started to formulate a Swedish nationalist discourse, they had only been under Swedish rule for a century and a half. An efficient carrot-and-stick policy of harsh indoctrination and civic integration had turned their population into Swedish citizens, but this result can hardly be interpreted as ethnic homogeneity. Political or civic homogeneity, perhaps, but it is the ethnic discourse I am questioning. And still I haven't even mentioned the Finnish people or the aboriginal Sami. Finland had been an integral part of Sweden for the better part of a millennium, and their peasants were represented in the Diet along with those from present-border Sweden. Their noblemen and burghers were often of non-Finnish descent, but also within Sweden, these estates contained a considerable proportion of foreign origin: Noblemen and burghers of German, Baltic, Polish, Scottish, Dutch or French extraction. At the other end of the status spectrum, there were social outcast categories like gypsies and *tattare* ("travellers"). The Jewish element in Sweden has up to the very recent been largely invisible due to earlier religious discrimination and later wariness of antisemitism, but the European Union has now given Yiddish minority language status in Sweden, along with Romani, Finnish, two Sami languages and the Swedish-Finnish borderland idiom Meänkieli[9].

To what extent this kaleidoscopic mixture could be considered more homogeneous than the populations of any other European country seems highly uncertain. I consider it an unproven national myth[10]. To the extent that Swedes have been convinced by this propaganda, it may have created a subjective homogeneity, but this is surely no 'national treasure'. On the contrary, it is a national danger, as it may impede adjustment to reality. The large proportion of recent immigrants might not have the chance to choose freely between individual and collective integration, or whatever personal mixture of these strategies they might come up with, if they are always contrasted with a massive imagined conformity.

In this context another important recent reconsideration of Swedish identity should also be mentioned: *Är svensken människa* ("Are Swedes human?") by Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh. Their discussion concerns the Swedish self-image – the title is borrowed from one of their examples out of the large Swedish self-castigating literature – and their principal and quite convincing thesis is that the Swedish culture is at the same time extremely individualist and strongly reliant on the state. The explanation of this seeming paradox, is that the state guarantees our independence from other collectivities and thus leaves us free to choose our own commitments – and even more important: our non-commitments. Of course this is more of a utopia than a description of reality, but an important point is that to many outsiders this type of freedom would not seem all that attractive. Surprisingly, the authors trace the development of this radical individualism from the same writer, Erik Gustaf Geijer, who is cited by

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[9] Which has earlier in general been considered a Finnish dialect, although this official recognition should support its pretentions to language status.
[10] The late (14th century) abolition of slavery in Sweden, and the important role of Swedish vikings in the European slave-trade,

Hagerman as the leading inventor of Swedish conservative nationalism[11]. In his old age Geijer had astonished the Swedish public by converting to liberalism, and it is the radical old man, not the young conservative, that is discussed by Berggren-Trägårdh. Carl Jonas Love Almqvist, Ellen Key and Alva Myrdal mark the most important further steps toward statist individualism, although Strindberg and Astrid Lindgren are also discussed.

The statist-individualist analysis is complemented by something the writers term "the Swedish theory of love". According to this 'theory' true love can exist only where the lovers are completely independent of each other. Stated in such a stark form it sounds almost frighteningly demanding and existentialist, but it is hard to deny that the line of reasoning sounds familiar to a Swede.

This whole story may sound totally unrelated to Hagerman's, and in many ways it is. It is a mentality consistent with the modernist paradigm that is reconstructed by Berggren-Trägårdh, while Hagerman strives to uncover the hidden remnants of the old reactionary nationalism. Still, both of these studies are deeply concerned with the relevance for the present of notions from the past, and in that respect they are complementary.

A consistent statist-individualist immigration policy would give every immigrant the chance of formulating his or her own individual version of integration and would therefore tend to attract those presumptive immigrants who would appreciate a free choice, whatever their cultural background. This would be in sharp contrast to the different versions of cultural essentialism, where people are identified with their cultural background and either are expected to conform to it or demanded to give it up in favour of full assimilation. The first of those alternatives resembles the British policy criticized by Amartya Sen[12], who makes a forceful case for respecting the individual identities of immigrants and minority members, as against Tony Blair's strategy of negotiating with so-called 'responsible leaders' for immigrant communities. The second alternative resembles the Danish, where the demand for full assimilation leads to the need of unequivocal criteria for what you are expected to conform to, and thus to the construction of an increasingly monolithic version of Danishness. As both of these uncomfortable alternatives correspond to tendencies articulated also in the Swedish debate, the statist-individualist position might be a constructive basis for a third way.

This should also be more compatible with the ideology of the Swedish welfare state. This is still often envisioned in the terms of the *folkhem* ('people's home') vision from the 1928, when Social Democrat chairman and eventual prime minister Per-Albin Hansson formulated the almost utopian notion of society as a 'good home' for the people: a home where there are no mistreated stepchildren or pampered favourites. Eventually, a surprisingly broad consensus formed around this ideal, which was hardly seriously questioned before the Thatcher revolution started to make an impact on Swedish politics.

In the present-day debates the limitations of this vision has often been stressed, and Maja Hagerman at times seems to suggest that the notion of a 'people's home' was

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[11] The Swedish literature on Geijer is voluminous. For a detailed discussion in English of his role in formulating Swedish nationalism, see Peter Hall: The social construction of nationalism. Sweden as an example.Lund 1998.

[12] Amartya Sen: Identity and Violence. The Illusion of Destiny. New York 2006

only possible because of the imagined consanguinity. This is by no means the only possible interpretation though. Today the *folkhem* ideal is most conspicuously propagated by two diametrically opposed political parties: on the one hand by the avowed internationalists of the Left-wing Party, and on the other by the crypto-racist isolationists in the Sweden Democrats. To claim that the people's home ideal is premised on the exclusivity of a narrowly bounded nationalism, may amount to a self-fulfilling cynicism that concedes the victory before the match has started.

That the vision is compatible with a racist world-view doesn't mean that it *is* a racist notion. From the very beginning, the concept has been ambiguous and contested. Per-Albin Hansson picked up the catchword from conservatives like Rudolf Kjellén, and re-charged it with an egalitarian content[13]. In Hansson's formulation, the edge was turned against class injustice, but it might just as well be given an anti-racist interpretation, if gipsies and travellers are to be counted among the 'stepchildren' that deserve an equal place at the table. The 'people's home' ideal was contested from the beginning, and could be given a radical turn as well as a conservative one. The struggle over the right interpretation continues, and if we view it in the light of the Swedish modernist tradition, it would be most natural to see it as mutable and redefinable. The open-door version of the 'people's home' ideal that can be found in Olof Palme's rhetoric may seem hopelessly idealist and out of date, but even within the context of the European Union, something along the same lines could offer a much better comparative advantage to Sweden than would any version of an ethnic definition of Swedishness. Swedish self-understanding has always had a strong civic component, resembling the American version of nationalism in that freedom and democratic participation has been envisioned as a national heritage[14]. Whatever the level of exaggerated idealization involved in that viewpoint, there are several characteristics of Swedish society and culture that are remarkable in a comparative context, and have deep historical roots: broad popular participation, a high level of legitimacy for the state, a tradition of constant negotiation, a search for consensus, a deep aversion to warfare, a moderate rate of inequality and a positive view of change. If Berggren and Trägårdh are right we could also add a more specific characteristic: a positive view of the state as the guarantee of our right and ability to be truly individual.

If Sweden no longer heads the ranking-lists in standard of living or economic growth, we still seem to embrace modernity – or what is now often described as post-modern values – to a higher extent than most other countries. When we discuss Swedish culture and Swedish traditions, we should not forget that perpetual modernization has by now become one of our most distinctive traditions.

When I have studied and compared different contemporary theories about Europe's historical rise to world dominance, I have found only one real point of consensus. In one way or another, everyone stressed the dynamic importance of the simultaneous interaction and independence of the societies that together constitute Europe[15]. If we would accept diversity as a fundamental characteristic of Europe – perhaps even the

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[13] Hans Dahlkvist: 'Folkhemsbegreppet – Rudolf Kjellén vs Per Albin Hansson' Historisk Tidskrift 2002:3.
[14] Clearly visible already in the rhetoric of the Peasant Estate during the 17th century: 'We know that in other countries, the commonalty is held in thrall, and we fear that the same will befall us, who are yet born a free people.' (my translation).
[15] Emilsson 1996:8 and 2005:126ff.

most fundamental one – then every national or regional variant of the European development should be expected to present its own pecularities, which would constitute their respective contributions to the diversity of Europe. Such a perspective might lead to a wariness about unnecessary harmonizations (which could weaken the dynamic properties of multiplicity), but on the other hand, it would certainly offer no support for isolationism.

If the search for Sweden's role in a changing and expanding Europe would make us turn back towards the conservative nationalism of the young Geijer and abandon the radical individualism which the old Geijer paved the way for, we would have adapted to eurosclerosis and missed the opportunity to take an active part in the modernization of an entire continent, or more. For a country that was once described as the social laboratory of the world, that would be a sorry ending indeed.