

Book Review: The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics edited by Jon Pierre

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*In this new edited volume, **The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics**, Jon Pierre brings together 50 contributors to describe and analyse Sweden's past and contemporary political and constitutional settlement.*

Challenging romanticising interpretations of Sweden as an inherent beacon of prosperity and equality, this is a much-needed, well-organised and comprehensive collection that traces the evolution, development and possible twilight of the 'Swedish model', writes Carl Truedsson.

***The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*. Jon Pierre (ed.). Oxford University Press. 2016.**

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'Consider a bumblebee', Swedish social democratic prime minister, Göran Persson, famously once mused. 'With its far too heavy body and flimsy wings it shouldn't fly, yet somehow it does.' Through this fitting analogy, Persson deftly captured the essence of the social democratically-inflected 'Swedish model', which had long both puzzled and enthralled international observers. How could a country fixated with full employment and with such high levels of taxation and universal welfare provision stay afloat, let alone competitive, in an ever-increasingly globalised economy racing towards the bottom? On first reading the blurb on the back of *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*, the answer, it would seem, is that this post-war halcyon settlement is over. Even the once-resilient Swedish bee has fallen prey to neoliberalism's toxically seductive nectar.

This regression from the exceptional to the unexceptional is what the 50 contributors – nearly all political scientists and nearly all Swedish – seek to describe and analyse. Introducing this thesis, the editor Jon Pierre takes his cue from a recent essay by esteemed Swedish political scientist Bo Rothstein. Titled '[The End of Swedish Exceptionalism](#)', and published just days after the September 2014 election that saw the Social Democrats (in a minority coalition with the Greens) manage to narrowly retake power after eight years in opposition, Rothstein's essay dismally concluded that 'the days of what has become known as Swedish exceptionalism are over. The country no longer has an exceptionally strong social democracy. Its level of inequality is no longer exceptionally low, and its level of public spending will no longer be exceptionally high.'

A recurring theme in this *Handbook* is that perhaps Sweden was never the City on a Hill that it has long been described as. International and domestic observers' eyes, political-economic historian Jenny Andersson's chapter asserts, have often been fixated on a romantically-tinged cloud-free vision of what the Swedish model could have been, not what it was or indeed has become. The macro-economic 'shocks' of the 1970s, which reverberated across the advanced industrial economies, precipitated a fundamental shift in knowledge production even for the Social Democrats, whose reign was then still nearly hegemonic. 'New economic ideas' (read neoliberal ideas) captivated Social Democratic agenda setters as a powerful set of 'neutral instruments of steering, befitting a political culture of pragmatic problem-solving, affecting only the means, not the ends, of political action' (Andersson, 568). Gradually, like an invasive species, these new ideas colonised Sweden's political landscape, forever reshaping the contours of the Swedish model.

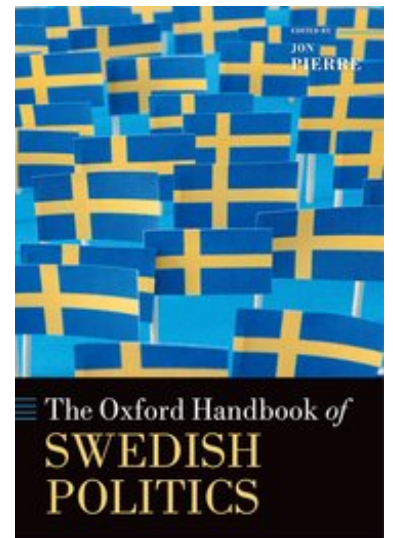




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Beginning in the 1980s, policymakers (many of whom were Social Democrats) increasingly viewed welfare and social service delivery through an economised prism. At the municipal and regional levels, this vision was especially vivid. Guided by the precepts of 'efficiency and empowerment of citizens', New Public Management reforms were enacted with the hope 'that politicians should stop "rowing" and focus on "steering" instead' (Lars Niklasson, 405). Coupled with this reorientation, the early 1990s witnessed a nexus of political and economic uncertainty and change. Sweden's economy experienced a [financial crisis](#) fuelled by an imploding housing bubble. A one-term centre-right government under premier Carl Bildt was premised on getting Sweden's finances in order and, once and for all, locking in the neoliberalised trajectory of the Swedish model already underway. Deregulation and privatisation of welfare and social services ensued. The belief in the market as liberator of the individual and the ultimate information processor was celebrated. So too was membership of the European Union, which effectively hammered home 'the economic truths of competitive globalization' and conformance with 'market pressures' (Andersson, 572).

Bildt's government's reforms proved too much for the Swedish public. As veteran opinion surveyor Stefan Svallfors accounts, public support for 'spending grew substantially in the crisis' (26). This discontent helped return the Social Democrats to office in 1994. However – and here's the kicker, Andersson argues – rather than altering course, the Social Democrats actually intensified the neoliberalisation of the Swedish model by introducing 'highly individualized and financialized' pension reform. The enduring consequence of this neoliberal revision to the Swedish model has been to shore up a 'political consensus between social democracy and the political right', which has remained in place to this day (Andersson, 573). Indeed, in their chapter on Sweden's economic policy over the last 100 years, Leif Lewin and Johannes Lindvall conclude that the overall consequence of this neoliberalised consensus is that 'Sweden's economic policies are hard to distinguish from those of its partners in the European Union' (590).

Politically, this normalisation has also increasingly been reflected in Sweden's party system. The country's once unprecedentedly stable five-party system dominated by the Social Democrats, Nicholas Aylott describes, has gone the way of the rest of the Nordic countries, and become increasingly crowded and diffused. In part the result of 'the development of a more heterogeneous, less class-based society' and also their coalescence with the centre-right around neoliberalism, the Social Democrats have experienced a prolonged decline of electoral support (163). Paradoxically, at the same time, Sweden's parliamentary settlement has become increasingly characterised by a

'bloc-based competition replacing more fluid patterns of cooperation' (164). This hardened division between a centre-left led by the Social Democrats versus a centre-right dominated by the Conservative Moderates has been complemented by the entrance of the right-wing xenophobic populist [Sweden Democrats](#) into parliament in 2010, whose ascendancy continues seemingly unabated.

With this less than rosy picture of Sweden's political trajectory sketched by various contributors to the *Handbook*, the question is begged: are things really [so bad](#) in Sweden? Sweden, we are told habitually, is not exceptional; it is average. As a half-Swede, I cannot help but suspect that this pandering to the average has something to do with the ever-present desire in Sweden to abide by [Jante's Law](#). Essentially a social exercise, this is when Swedes try to one-up each other in downplaying their achievements, with people showing open discomfort with showboating.

But seriously, all jests about my compatriots' discomfort with exceptionalism aside, as someone in the early stages of trying to get their head around Swedish politics, the *Handbook* is a most welcome – and sorely needed – contribution. An impressively heavy, well-presented and organised tome, it paints a rich tapestry of Sweden's past and contemporary political and constitutional settlement – from the dawn of the exceptional Swedish model through to its present (alleged) twilight as a beacon of prosperity and equality. Each of the ten sections opens with a two-page introduction by the designated editor(s) and is then followed by four chapters that provide an up-to-date overview of the topics and issues that will be of interest for anyone wanting to better understand the political landscape of the home to [putrid delicacies](#).

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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