Check for updates

Received: 7 November 2022 | Revised: 22 June 2023 | Accepted: 22 June 2023

DOI: 10.1111/1758-5899.13245

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Sweden's image in the world: Still a ‘model’?

Ralph Schroeder

Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

Correspondence
Ralph Schroeder, Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK.
Email: ralph.schroeder@oii.ox.ac.uk

Funding information
Vetenskapsrådet, Grant/Award Number: 2021-01609

Abstract
Sweden has long been regarded as a ‘model’ for societal development. Recently, with the rise of an anti-immigrant party and negative news coverage of crime, the image of a progressive Sweden has frayed. Positive models for societal development have existed in the past and included the United States during the heyday of modernization theory. This paper argues that positive models are useful, partly to crystallize options among the much-debated varieties of capitalism, and partly as ideals which can be held up by social thinkers and publics as aspirations for the good society. This paper reviews the evolution of the Swedish model from a ‘middle way’ between Soviet communism and American capitalism to a welfare state under strain. It also examines how the Swedish model has been reinforced by its high international standing. The perceptions of Sweden abroad and domestically have changed in recent years. While these perceptions have correctly identified challenges not just for Sweden but also for other countries with similar problems, Sweden's government and civil society may be able to address them. The paper explores the lessons that can be learned from the current shortcomings and potential renewal of the strengths of the Swedish model, including its wider influence.

1 | THE SWEDISH ‘MODEL’ AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Among social scientists and among a wider public, Sweden, often alongside other Nordic countries, has often been regarded as a ‘model’ of societal development. Ever since the 1936 publication of Marquis Childs' ‘Sweden – the Middle Way’ (1936), Sweden's social policies have been much debated, sometimes as an egalitarian utopia and at other times as a paternalist dystopia. This paper charts the evolution of the Swedish model but focuses on how it has recently come into question, both domestically and abroad. A turning point came with Sweden's immigration policies during the European so-called ‘crisis’ of Syrian refugees in 2015, when Sweden received a higher number of refugees per capita than any other country. Since then, the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrat party has steadily gained support, becoming the second largest party in the most recent election in September of 2022 and now providing essential parliamentary support to the ruling coalition that forms the government and contributing to its policies. Before the election, Sweden was an exception among the Nordic countries in that there was a cordon sanitaire whereby the Sweden Democrats were blocked from being part of the government while in other Nordics such as Finland, Denmark and Norway, anti-immigrant parties had been included in governing coalitions. Sweden's status as a model, and its exceptional status among the Nordic countries, has thus recently arguably come to an end.

Sweden and the Nordic countries have been regarded as distinctive in social science research, as one end of the spectrum in the ‘varieties of capitalism’ literature, with strong social protections (Esping-Andersen, 1990; see also Pontusson, 2005; Mann, 2013: 129–178). Sweden also has a distinctive image in the world at large, as a ‘moral superpower’ (Sanandaji, 2020: 41), not just in terms of domestic social progress but also due to its progressive foreign policies. Rom-Jensen et al. (2023; see also Byrkjeflot et al. (2021) systematically examined the academic literature on the Nordic model from the mid- 1960s

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
© 2023 The Authors. *Global Policy* published by Durham University and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

up until 2020 and found that the research foci have shifted over the course of time, with recent turning points particularly around the financial crisis of 2008/2009 and more recently still with the refugee 'crisis' in 2015. Still, the welfare state and Esping-Andersen's 'Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism' (which will be discussed shortly) figure prominently in Rom-Jensen et al.'s analysis.

This paper will examine both the perceptions and the realities of Sweden as a model. It will proceed as follows: first, it will chart how Sweden came to be seen as a beacon of progress and also criticized, briefly noting comparisons with the Danish 'model'. Next, it will present several examples of how the reputation of the Swedish model has recently suffered, drawing together a number of sources and focusing on countries like the United States and China. Here we can also highlight several incidents that have brought Sweden to the forefront of international attention, including reactions to Sweden's immigration and refugee policies, its climate champion Greta Thunberg, and its handling of the pandemic. The paper argues that the Swedish model faces challenges that are distinctive to the country but that can also be usefully compared to other countries that face ultranationalist threats to democracy. Moreover, the potential solutions that Sweden seeks can also provide lessons for the challenges that lie ahead as a rising economic nationalism makes states look towards models of how open borders can be combined with protecting social well-being. In that sense, the paper concludes, Sweden can still provide a model, though this will require deft policies and public support.

Policy Implications

- Policies should be identified to reconcile strong welfare protections with continuing immigration pressures, including policies that can gain strong electoral support.
- Populist anti-immigration parties are often strong when they are in opposition in democracies. When they contribute to government policymaking, they should be made responsible for policies that work – and so held accountable.
- Compared to traditional media, social media often have more critical voices with outsized effects. They deserve to be heard, even if the views of the population or the leaders that voice online grievances should not be exaggerated or unduly amplified. This applies especially to how countries (in this case, Sweden) are criticized from abroad, which often reflects domestic grievances more than the countries being criticized.
- Models of societal development, such as the Nordic and Swedish models, should not be idealized uncritically. But neither should they be abandoned; they can continue to provide valuable guideposts for progressive social policies.

2 | THE SWEDISH MODEL AND 'GETTING TO DENMARK'

Since the idea of 'models' can be interpreted and used in different ways, a clear distinction can be made at the outset between analytical or academic social science uses of models, as against policy uses of these models, and thirdly, models in the media or among the public. First, analytical models used in academic research focus on how the Nordic – or here more narrowly Swedish – model of the relation between state and society is at one end of the extreme, with a strong state with an extensive welfare system, in the variety of paths of societal development with the 'Anglos' or the US, which have a weaker state and stronger markets – at the other extreme of high-income democracies. These extremes will shortly be refined to concentrate on citizenship rights through the lens of social science theory. But secondly, these academic models also feed into how the Swedish model is used by policymakers, though in this case, Sweden (like other 'models' – we can think here of 'e-Stonia' as a model for the emergence of the digital state) is used as a model in the sense of its exemplarity. Here a model might be a guide to policymaking whereby analytical considerations are mixed with normative ones. Models in this case typically focus on particular areas such as labor relations or how to cope with financial crises or more recently, on different pandemic policies. Finally, models in terms of their normative exemplarity are also part of public images of other countries as shaped by the media. In this case they are not just normative, but also consist of ways of making stereotyped contrasts between one's own country and the image of the model country. They also entail a contrast between image and 'reality' or performance, both positive and negative.

As we shall see, the three types of models can overlap but they are also distinct. In what follows, I argue that what locates Sweden as one pole of extremes among the varieties of patterns of societal development is the idea of strong social citizenship rights arising from its distinct state-society relationship. This idea is broader than welfare state models and points to options for other countries, and in this sense serves as an analytical model of societal development. An immediate counterargument might be that the institutions of a country with a population of ten million with longstanding traditions cannot be compared to other countries. But that argument only needs to be stated clearly

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

for its shortcomings to be apparent: deep and broad social citizenship rights, as understood by T. H. Marshall and others in a well-established social science tradition (developed below), also in principle represent a policy option for all high-income countries with a strong state capacity. Whether policy elites choose to identify such rights as normatively desirable and whether they can adapt them to other circumstances is another matter.

Against this background, and before we come to social citizenship rights, it will be useful to further explore the Swedish 'model', with its long history of debate both among academic social scientists and a broader public. The Swedish model first became much discussed in the US with the 1936 publication book by Childs, 'Sweden – the Middle Way'. Marklund, in a detailed examination of the Swedish model (2009; see also Andersson & Hilson, 2009), argues that there was in fact an even earlier interest in Sweden: When empirical social science emerged in America, Sweden was seen as a 'social laboratory' or a testing ground for the ideas put forth in academic social research. After the Second World War, there was a shift whereby Sweden came to be seen as a compromise between Soviet statist communism and American laissez faire capitalism. And more recently still, Sweden has become the 'model' of an orderly, peaceful, and above all egalitarian society.

Despite these shifts, there is a continuity in the image of Sweden in the idea that the state is responsible for the well-being of its citizens. This, of course, is the idea of the 'folkhem' or 'peoples' home' that looks after the welfare of its citizens. The 'folkhem' has been at the center of Swedish politics for most of the past century, during much of that time embodied in the rule of the Social Democrat party but also more widely anchored in how Swedes think of their society. Putting this distinctive idea into practice came about slowly: Swedish state spending did not depart from the level of the US or other Western democracies until the 1960s (Steinmo, 2010: 203) and income equality Sweden similarly did not surpass levels in the US until the 1960s. Since then, however, Sweden has held its position among the world's most egalitarian societies (Mann & Riley, 2007; Our World in Data, 2022).

The Swedish 'model' has also been showcased in various rankings and measurements: McCluskey documents how Sweden ranks highest or near the top on a number of social development indicators (2019: 53–8), including for the receptiveness to asylum seekers and the ability to integrate migrants (2019: 57). These rankings also measure things like overall livability, gender equality, provision of welfare services, foreign aid levels, the lack of corruption, transparency, and government accountability. Further, the rankings also cover a friendly business climate, innovation, and levels of investment, as well as a positive international reputation (Rapacioli, 2018: 36–8). These rankings serve to maintain Sweden's high reputation, which are also bolstered by Sweden's tradition of neutrality in foreign policy (the policy ended after the Cold War, and when Sweden joined the EU, but Sweden still lives in the wake of a two hundred year long tradition of neutrality) and relatively high levels of spending on development aid, the latter, again, mirroring other Nordic countries. With Sweden's current application to join the NATO alliance in the light of the war in Ukraine, Sweden's status is subject to change, though the application is still being considered at the time of writing (and causing considerable tensions in terms of Turkish-Swedish foreign relations).

This brings us to the longer-standing use of models in the social sciences: Francis Fukuyama, in his two-volume work of comparative sociology, used the phrase 'Getting to Denmark' as a shorthand for the kind of rule of law and accountable government that societies should aspire to. In making this argument, Fukuyama was in the tradition of a long line of thinkers (see Anderson, 1974: 173–91) who locate the origins of a distinctive Scandinavian welfare state in a strong state in the eighteenth century. Sweden already at that time had a peasantry that constituted a 'relatively well-educated and increasingly well-organized social class' (Fukuyama, 2011: 432). This agricultural base, in alliance with a growing middle class, was able to push for more inclusive representation, and thus later developed a 'well-functioning bureaucracy' oriented to the 'public purpose' (2014: 26). This argument fits well with a broader one about how strong state capacity in the Nordic countries has led to well-ordered societies and effective economic policies.

Fukuyama thinks that many contemporary states are dysfunctional, but that Denmark and other Nordic countries offer ways forward. Arguably, however, cohesive societies need more than well-functioning states; social stability in high-income democracies also depends on widely shared prosperity. This includes a strong welfare state that provides shared rights to all citizens. This idea owes a lot to T. H. Marshall and his conceptualization of citizenship rights and how they have progressed over the course of time (see Turner, 1986). Marshall argued that citizenship rights developed from civil (freedom of political expression and association) to political (electoral participation) to social rights (the social protections of the welfare state). This idea of a unilinear progression is simplified, and there are paths of political development where citizenship rights have taken a different course and they can also be reversed (Mann, 1988; Schroeder, 2013). Still, social citizenship rights have arguably been taken furthest in Scandinavian welfare states like Sweden and Denmark (even if there are important differences between the two).

We will come back later to how this trajectory of political development currently faces challenges, including to the extension of citizenship rights. And, as mentioned, there is an implied teleology in Marshall's idea of expanding citizenship rights, though it is not necessary to

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

follow the teleology of an inevitable expansion: citizenship rights can be reversed, and they are contested. But their expansion in practice can be seen as a model in the sense of representing one path of societal development among other paths. Again, social scientific knowledge of different options among societal development paths provides one type of analytical model, which then allows policy, secondly, to weigh how the model can provide a normative goal or yardstick for emulation. How the public mind understands this model and the media frame it as exemplary, thirdly, is separate again – even if all three may overlap.

3 | BACKLASH AGAINST SWEDEN AND THE SWEDISH MODEL

As we have seen, Sweden has been a model among social scientists and its standing is also internationally recognized. However, recently there have been some changes in how Sweden is perceived abroad by foreign media and this is relayed back to the wider public. This shift in Sweden's image has been documented by Selin and Stenberg who work for the Swedish Institute, a government agency that is tasked with monitoring and promoting Sweden's standing abroad. They see a clear break in 2015/16 around the issue of Sweden's 'migration policies and refugee intake, coupled to violence and disorder' (Selin & Stenberg, 2018: 107). Initially, they say, reporting about Sweden's role in accepting refugees was positive. This was because Sweden took in more refugees in 2015 proportional to its population than any other country in the European Union, including Germany which took in the largest number overall. But since the so-called 'crisis', public attitudes became increasingly negative, though attention to the issue of migration declined after a period of regular reports in traditional media. On social media, in contrast, the tone was overwhelmingly negative from the start and has continued and even increased in volume after this period and Sweden is still spoken of as being 'in crisis' (2018: 108).

The Swedish Institute has collected fine-grained data about Sweden's image in the world for several decades, and so the shift can also be tracked over longer periods. The effect of the 'crisis' can thus be put into context, including how it played out somewhat differently in several countries. Based on these data, it is clear that Sweden's image has suffered, mainly due to how social media distort and amplify the negative associations of immigration with crime and disorder. For example, the Swedish Institute has devoted several reports to Chinese images of Sweden. In a recent report (Swedish Institute, 2020), it documented the views of Chinese students who had studied in Sweden as well as young Chinese urbanites on the social media platform Weibo. Both groups were critical above all of Sweden's arrogant views towards China, and while they had positive views of Swedish nature and celebrities and design, these views were also clouded by Sweden's crime, immigration, and lately also its handling of the pandemic. This is a change from an earlier report (Swedish Institute, 2016) when Chinese social media were examined, again skewing towards a younger urban population: that report showed that the Swedish model was well-known among this population and associated with high equality, low corruption, and a strong welfare state (Swedish Institute, 2016: 12).

To take a different case, Sweden is not so well-known in India. But among the Swedish Institute's sample population in five major cities, Sweden is known for its welfare state and its natural beauty as well as its feminism, though Indians distance themselves from this feminism with their more patriarchal views (Swedish Institute, 2018). These findings apply to Indians who know Sweden more, and its older population also seems to like Sweden more (we will come back shortly with some different views).

In the US, to take yet another example, there are often positive views of Sweden, though a minority (7%, mostly men) have a negative view of Sweden with its immigration and crime. Again, this view is more pronounced on social media. That is not surprising when we consider that one of most widely covered recent Sweden-related news events was a tweet by then-President Trump in English entitled 'last night in Sweden' (The Guardian, 2017), when Trump compared the incidents of car burning during riots in several Swedish cities to the Brussels, Nice and Paris terror attacks. Swedes were either amused by this or pointed to the error Trump made: Trump later admitted that they were based on a Fox News program he had seen the previous night related to immigration and that the incidents were not terror-related.

Overall, a recent Swedish Institute report concludes, Sweden's image has been impacted most negatively by its immigration and refugee policies, coupled to disorder and crime, an effect that has persisted most strongly on social media (Swedish Institute, 2018: 25). And while Sweden's image has recovered somewhat, there is still a contingent on social media around the world that pushes the idea that Sweden has become crime ridden as part of its immigration policies. Further, as Rapacioli (2018: 47–62) points out, social media, and especially English-language social media in this case, have a far greater reach than Swedish and English traditional news media.

These recent changes can be put in a longer-term context and tied to incidents that relate more directly to Sweden's relations with other countries. As mentioned, Sweden has often had the image of a political utopia in Western democracies. But in India, for example, Sweden is most closely associated with the Bofors scandal in the 1980s which had major political

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

repercussions. The scandal concerned the Swedish arms manufacturer Bofors which, in 1986, paid $5 million into a Swiss bank account benefitting several Indian politicians in return for a contract worth $1.3 billion to supply howitzers. When this was revealed, first in Swedish media and then in Indian media, in 1987, the scandal contributed to the defeat of Rajiv Gandhi's Congress Party in the 1989 elections (Misra, 2007: 373–4). The legal proceedings and media coverage in the wake of the scandal dragged out well into the 1990s and beyond, firmly linking Congress to the corrupt political practices with which Modi's populism and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) continues to tar the Gandhi 'dynasty' to this day.

Recently, the main Sweden-related incident in India occurred when, in February 2021, Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg sent an encouraging tweet to support the farmers protesting against Modi's agricultural reforms. She tweeted not only support, but also a 'toolkit' for how to make their protest more effective in the media. This tweet resulted in a barrage of social media invective against Thunberg from Modi supporters, typically taking a 'foreigners should not meddle in domestic affairs' tone. Counter-protesters against the protesting farmers even burned an effigy of Thunberg (The Guardian, 2021) and defended the Modi government's hard line against the farmers' protests (although the government later relented and acceded to the farmers' demands, mainly due to electoral politics).

The Chinese government also sees Thunberg in a negative light, describing her as a mouthpiece or stooge for Western governments that try to put too much blame for climate change on China while taking too little action themselves. This was evident, for example, in the coverage of Thunberg in the government's propaganda newspaper Global Times (2021) where she was described as naively pro-Western. Previously, the main encounter with Sweden that the Chinese public may have been familiar with was the acquisition of Volvo by the Chinese carmaker Geely in 2010. That was also a year in which Sweden was ahead of the US as a destination for Chinese overseas direct investment (Shambaugh, 2013: 181, 196–7).

More recently Sweden became known in China through an incident in 2018 involving three Chinese tourists in Stockholm. The incident occurred when the tourists tried to check in to a hotel on the outskirts of Sweden's capital, but after a disagreement with hotel staff, they were forcibly removed by the police. A video with the tourists lying on the ground screaming outside the hotel on the sidewalk circulated online, and the Chinese embassy and Chinese state media accused Sweden of brutal behaviour and violating human rights, even though the police were later cleared of misconduct by the Swedish authorities (Jerdén & Bohman, 2019). The incident resulted in a major online anti-Swedish campaign on Chinese social media, as well as receiving widespread coverage in Sweden. The campaign was in keeping with China's view not just of Sweden but of the West generally (and the US in particular) as being crime-ridden and disorderly countries which do not adequately provide safety – and in this restricted sense human rights – for their citizens.

The US offers an interesting complement to this picture. Americans perhaps associate Sweden mainly with 19th century immigrants to the mid-West, or with the socialism of Bernie Sanders' politics. But, as mentioned, Trump's 'last night in Sweden' tweet received more attention in 2017 than any other Sweden-related content on Twitter; the next highest was the terror attack in the middle of Stockholm which received half as much attention (Swedish Institute, 2018: 19). As Rapacioli (2018: 28–30) notes, when Trump was corrected about the terror-relatedness on the incident, these corrections received little attention. In this way Trump could signal the virtues of his own policies by pointing to the alleged dangers of Swedish immigration policy, a racist message that has resonated among supporters of right-wing populist anti-immigrant agendas more broadly. More recently, in 2019 during the peak of the Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion protests, Trump tweeted attacks on Greta Thunberg, which were widely viewed online, particularly among his supporters (Yan et al., 2021: 14). In short, media images shape Sweden, but they also often reflect not events in Sweden as much as they reflect political currents in countries where they originate. Put differently, media images circulate globally, but images of different nations still reflect the concerns of national media and their publics.

A brief contrast with the image of Sweden in the Arabic-speaking world can be instructive here, since it illustrates how this image can reverberate domestically: after the refugee 'crisis' in 2015, Syrians became the largest foreign-born population in Sweden. One consequence of this influx, as Estrada et al. (2021) show, is a clash over how children with a Middle Eastern background are treated by the Swedish social services. There are cases when children from Syrian families have been taken into the care of the Swedish social services because of fears of mistreatment, and these cases have called forth online reactions in the Arabic-speaking world which represents the Swedish authorities as posing a threat to migrant families. As Estrada Tun, and Jörum (2021: 1302) point out, 'fears of interfering public authorities are generally unfounded', but online rumours with these fears are widespread on Arabic-speaking Facebook groups and other platforms. These online reactions, in turn, have led to debates in Swedish news about misinformation campaigns and about the compatibility between gender and family norms in Sweden and those of migrants with a Middle Eastern background.

Thus the shift in Sweden's image is not only taking place abroad but also domestically. The Swedish Institute

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

found that a sizeable minority within Sweden shares the views of a Sweden in decline (Swedish Institute, 2018: 16). This shift is also evident in surveys done by the SOM Institute at the University of Gothenburg, which examines various social issues and media uses in Sweden. Between 2012 and 2019, it found that the proportion of the Swedish population that thought Sweden is going in the wrong direction increased from 39% to 61%, whereas the proportion thinking it is going in the right direction decreased from 30% to 19% (Martinsson, 2020: 288). In the period between 2009 and 2019, those who thought that immigration and integration were the most pressing social problems increased from 14% to 38% whereas the economy had become a much less pressing social problem during this time (Martinsson, 2020: 290). More recently, Lindell and Pelling (2021) undertook a detailed analysis of six different localities in Sweden where the Sweden Democrats had higher than average support. They found, interviewing 318 participants, that immigration, and associated with it the issues of segregation and integration and of criminality and violence, are regarded as Sweden's most pressing problems. A further finding is that their interviewees blame elite politicians who are removed from the problems in areas with large migrant populations (2021, p.57, 66, 119) and that they mistrust media that do not report on these problems (2021: 70–76).

Before drawing out conclusions, it can be mentioned briefly that Sweden came to international attention in very recent years due to its distinctive pandemic policies. Unlike in most high-income democracies, Sweden's policies had fewer COVID-19 restrictions, with no national lockdowns and fewer mask restrictions and less closing down of schools and businesses. Sweden's pandemic policies were an international outlier (Baldwin, 2021) and received much attention in the media. And in the US, for example, there were protests in April 2020 outside the Minnesota governor's mansion with chants of 'be like Sweden' (Business Insider, 2020). Simons (2020) argues that the foreign news media frame shifted from 'bold' in taking a different approach to other countries – to become a 'pariah' in terms of how it departed from the orthodoxy in terms of how the rest of the world was dealing with the pandemic. This picture, again, is complicated by how Sweden's policies were refracted through the lens of the politics and policies of other countries. Irwin (2022: 38), examining both English-language news reporting and Twitter posts by journalists and health experts, says that, in the US and the UK, Sweden was 'lauded…for staying open in comparison to implementing lockdowns' particularly among right-wing and libertarian groups. The debate over Sweden's pandemic policies continued among experts and in the media, and demonstrate that international attention to Sweden is not restricted to immigration and crime and that it serves as an example, both praised and blamed, around the world.

4 | A MODEL BEYOND SWEDEN AND THE NORDICS?

How has Sweden – and Denmark, a close comparative case – responded to the challenge of immigration? In the Danish case, an anti-immigrant right party (Danish People's Party) was responsible for shifting policies towards more restrictive immigration policies, though it has since declined while its anti-immigrant stance has been carried forward by other parties. In Sweden, the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrats used to be excluded as a 'pariah party' – the so-called 'cordon sanitaire' – though with much agonized discussion about whether the alternative Danish path of including their anti-immigrant agenda should be followed. Both countries are seeking to refine their citizenship and welfare policies, including finding ways to get those who have supported exclusionary parties to get on board with these policies. As Marklund notes, 'there are dangers in being praised, as the Danes would learn…just as the Swedish model was once called into question by accusations of socialism and paternalism, so Danish exemplarity today is troubled by accusations of xenophobia and parochialism' (2013: 279). Those accusations in Denmark have emerged in response to welfare benefits becoming more restricted for immigrants in recent years.

Extending rights more capaciously and universally would entail demonstrating that a more inclusive and diverse society benefits the whole of society more, and so perhaps charting a different path from the Danish one. Campbell and Hall say that in Denmark, 'it may well be that there is now a general acceptance of anti-immigration policies', which also means that 'not all good things go together, and it may be that limited openness to others may be the price paid if social democracy in general is likely to succeed', particularly if the Danish path is also to keep an open economy in the international system (2021: 223). In the Swedish case, it is possible that other options are available, but they would entail demonstrating, and not just during elections, that broader and deeper citizenship rights for all have common benefits.

As Campbell and Hall put it when they compare the Nordics with other countries, in an argument echoing Fukuyama, 'the strength of the state is enhanced when it is the home of the people: democratic, highly educated, and provided with welfare' and where the 'elite strive to serve the national interest' (2017: 2, 38). But Denmark has had coalition governments including parliamentary support from the populist 'Danish People's Party' that have pushed an anti-immigrant agenda and policies which arguably do not serve the national interest, such as 'shifting budgetary resources away from higher education toward programs for the elderly, the People's Party core constituency', which 'puts the Danish model at risk' (2017: 62). In Sweden, too, the

Sweden Democrat party has insisted on preserving welfare state benefits, a leftist position, to the chagrin of the Moderate Party and its new prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, who wanted to pare back these benefits in line with the more rightist stance of his party. But importantly, the Sweden Democrats want to maintain the welfare state and so the central pillar of the Swedish model. Since this model has had long-standing support in Sweden, the parties in the new coalition will need to agree and persuade the public that an enlarged 'folkhem' is in the interest of the country.

The way forward for Sweden will not be easy. But the current challenge in Swedish politics is focused on immigration rather than some of the broader cultural exclusionary agendas of the radical right in other countries that have seen a rise in populist leaders and parties. It is worth citing Duina and Carson at length on this point: 'the SD's [Sweden Democrats] orientation has not prevented it from advocating support for LGBTQ rights, gender equality, and a well-funded welfare state. In the SD's case, the anchoring has been – in line with the country's cultural, political, and institutional practices – *Sweden's traditional commitment to community and social inclusion*. Everyone, the logic goes, should feel welcome and looked-after in Sweden: discrimination and exclusion are unacceptable. Belonging, however, means respect for certain principles intrinsically related to inclusivity: equality, honesty, and a willingness to contribute to the whole. Those with different mindsets are not welcome: on top of the list are Middle Eastern immigrants who are depicted as morally depraved in their eagerness to take advantage of the system and demand that their values replace Swedish ones.' (2020: 13, emphasis in the original). In other words, the problem, as in Denmark, has arisen due to support for the people's home – albeit an exclusionary one.

The Sweden Democrats, as mentioned, though in some ways on the right of the political spectrum, support the welfare state and are also not generally culturally conservative as with rightist parties elsewhere. Hence their support too has come from previous supporters of various parties both on the right and the left (Rydgren & van der Meiden, 2018). This political support mirrors structural problems of integration: as Sanandaji (2020) points out, immigrants have much lower labour participation rates, partly because Sweden has a highly skilled labour force and recently arrived immigrants may need time to acquire the needed skills. The welfare chauvinism of Sweden's workers and of those most reliant on its welfare provision may thus be directed against protecting labour against the forces of economic globalization as much as it is directed at domestic issues of integration.

Even this is not the whole story, and the problem arises not just during elections, there has been a shift in attitudes 'from the ground up'. McCluskey (2019) ethnographic account details how, in a village in Skåne in the South of Sweden, attitudes towards refugees changed dramatically over the course of <2 years. Refugees were initially welcomed by a small local NGO 'Friends of Syria' which was formed to support them since their arrival early in 2013. But a year and half later, more than a quarter (one of the highest proportions in the country, 2019: 138) of the villagers, including the volunteers of the group themselves, voted in the 2014 general election for the anti-immigrant Sweden Democrat party, having come to regard refugees as a threat and a burden on the state. Overcoming the challenge of adapting to a large migrant population is partly an issue of viable governing coalitions that are strong enough to exclude the anti-immigrant party or that change their supporters' minds, but it is also a matter of convincing Swedish citizens of the benefits of integrating immigrants within the 'folkhem'.

As already mentioned, despite the attacks on Sweden, the country still enjoys a high reputation and high standing among nations. It is mainly associated with IKEA and ABBA and Volvo, though there are also national specificities to how other countries see Sweden, such as that the most famous Swedish person in China has for a long time been a table tennis player Jan-Ove Waldner (see Lundberg, 2005). The ideas of the 'Swedish model' and its merits and disadvantages differ between intellectual elites and academic social scientists as against the ideas and images of ordinary people. And apart from 'models' which, as mentioned, imply 'exemplarity', media images and public understandings will continue to be based on these broader and rather neutral associations. Yet they are sometimes intertwined via different events, as when the media highlight Trump's 'last night in Sweden' tweets or Greta Thunberg becomes the focus of media attention. If the point that elite and general public can be separated seems implausible – surely the concerns of academic researchers and elites and of the public at large can never be entirely divorced! – then it is useful to think of other academic debates when they are unconnected, such as whether the 'exceptionalism' of American politics rests on the absence of a working class (Lipset, 1996), or the aforementioned debate about whether the alliance between peasants and a rising middle class during Sweden's industrialization is responsible for the distinctive Swedish path towards the welfare state. More importantly, as we have seen, the international reputation of Sweden often rests not on what is actually going on in Sweden, but rather on using Sweden's problems to justify domestic political stances, such as Trump's anti-immigration policies, China's anti-Western criticisms, or India's support for Modi's ultranationalism. These hardenings of national chauvinisms do not impinge upon Sweden's ability to cope with its domestic realities.

The Swedish public may know little of the academic debates about the origins of Sweden's strong state or

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

its corporatism and welfare system – but the notion of 'folkhem' is familiar to all. Yet the idea of a model which would excessively blow your own trumpet would be against Swedish norms, especially 'jantelagen', the idea of not boasting too much. 'Jantelagen' was in fact originally coined by a Danish-Norwegian author Aksel Sandemose, but it has 'taken on a life of its own in Sweden' (Berggren and Trägårdh 2022: 300). Swedes are aware of their unique system, but the point is not to put Sweden beyond criticism but rather to draw out some lessons. Richard Evans (2013), in discussing the teaching of history in schools, argued that 'history isn't a mythmaking discipline, it's a myth-busting discipline'. The same goes for social science: even if social scientists debate 'exceptionalisms' and the lessons from 'models', the focus is on analytical distinctions and the policy implications or options that can be drawn from them rather than myth-making or myth-maintaining stories.

The Swedish model and its image in the world mirrors larger debates in the social sciences. In the 1990s and noughties, discussions about societal development in social theory often revolved around globalization, seen either as a boon by those favouring less state interference and more capitalism – or as a scourge by those taking the opposite view. In recent years, these discussions have turned to the asymmetric relations between the Global South and the Global North, with a particular focus on racism, colonialism and imperialism. That theoretical debate, however, has so far, by its own admission (Bhambra & Holmwood, 2021), been devoted to criticisms of existing theories of societal development without putting forward any constructive 'models'. If such models are desirable, then the reason that Sweden – or, for that matter, Denmark – can still be models is that the mechanism – how a state responds to forces from below – is a more general one (Mann, 2013; Schroeder, 2013). The mechanism whereby a state democratizes by providing deeper and broader and more inclusive citizenship rights – or the state's responsiveness to how civil society is incorporated to a greater extent – could apply to India, China, the US and elsewhere just as it does to Scandinavian ones, though taking into account the specific trajectories of the different nation-states.

One problem that especially smaller states like Sweden and Denmark need to counteract are growing calls for economic protectionism. A well-functioning society must ensure the capacity for all citizens to prosper in a wider world of open economic competition (Campbell & Hall, 2021). But the US and China, too, need to avoid the increasing economic nationalism and protectionism that has been intensifying in both countries and that arises from antagonistic and misleading or chauvinistic images of how the two countries regard each other. It can be mentioned here that India's economic protectionism, though less well-known than that in America and China, has also been growing. After the liberalization of the economy in the 1990s in India, in recent years Modi has also been tempted by growing economic protectionism (Manor, 2020; Naseemullah, 2017). In other words, the Swedish 'model' increasingly faces economic nationalism, as do other nations, and this too will be a test for its model – with potentially wider lessons.

A national election in Sweden took place on September 11, 2022. Domestically, the top issues included not just immigration and crime, but also education (there has been a lot of discussion of private for profit schooling in Sweden) and health. The election was also influenced by the war in Ukraine in two senses: the Swedish government's application to join NATO and the resulting energy crisis. But internationally, news about the election mainly focused on immigration and crime and the Sweden Democrats, according to an analysis by the Swedish Institute (https://si.se/notis-eller-varldsnyhet/). The election result was that the anti-immigration Sweden Democrat party became the second-largest party with 20.5% of the vote, more than the Moderate party with 19.1% as the third largest. The Social Democrats, with 30.3% were largest, but the right bloc of parties was just ahead of the left bloc of parties.

In this way the Sweden Democrats became crucial for the support of a right-wing coalition government. This was novel in Sweden: the parties on the 'right bloc' had decided to lift the cordon sanitaire and allow the Sweden Democrats to set the agenda of their coalition. Not quite, however: the small Liberal party (also part of the right-wing coalition) ruled out that Sweden Democrats should have ministerial posts, even if could contribute unofficially to government policies, a limitation that was accepted by the Sweden Democrats. The result is that the Sweden Democrats can shape the government's policies without actually being seen to be (ministerially) responsible for them. In other words, Swedish exceptionalism among the Nordic countries has been abandoned, but with a difference. How this coalition will work out in practice is not known. After the election but before forming the government, the four parties put together a 63 page document (the Tidöavtalet or Tidö agreement, named after the place where it was formulated) setting out the principles whereby their coalition would rule. Much of the document was devoted to immigration and crime, with the Sweden Democrats' position strongly represented. Again, how these policies will work is too early to say, but it seems certain that Sweden will have more restrictive immigration and refugee policies.

That does not mean the end of the Swedish welfare state, however: cutting back generous welfare policies is not on the cards, partly because, as discussed, the Sweden Democrats strongly favour them, thus belying the traditional left/right divide. The Swedish model is

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

thus likely to persist. But it continues in a new geopolitical environment: the US has lost its hegemony after the end of the Cold War, and so too its status as a model for development, or one of two major models – Western liberal capitalist versus communist. Sweden continues to provide a much-admired alternative for societal development that offers a generous welfare state that can provide equally for all members. Strong social citizenship rights in Sweden lead to more egalitarian outcomes and fewer social tensions. In this sense, there is a contrast not just with the US but also with India and China and perhaps beyond, where wealth and income inequalities and resulting social tensions have been growing since the end of the Cold War (and in India and the US, arguably, liberal democracy has weakened in recent years). Sweden as an analytical model maintains its place at the other end of the spectrum of societal development that defies these trends, with the exception of its rising tensions over social citizenship rights linked to immigration.

We have seen that both domestically and abroad, there is a recognition of the distinctiveness of this model but also a consensus about what currently ails it. From a comparative social science perspective, the model still represents the most 'social democratic' end of the spectrum of the varieties of capitalism. Yet these varieties still operate within open market – capitalist – economies, especially for smaller countries like Sweden and Denmark that are heavily dependent on trade. That makes Sweden and other Nordic countries somewhat different from other much larger states that are also currently facing challenges from populist politics and where there are calls for economic protectionism, such as the US and India. Sustaining the Swedish model with an open economy will require a new kind of politics. These politics are not dictated by neoliberal convergence since markets constrain but do not determine politics. Nor does support for welfare chauvinism inescapably exclude some parts of the population at the expense of others. The support for a populist party in Sweden was a response to the external shock of the refugee 'crisis' and immigration. This influx, combined with open market conditions and a strong welfare state, allows only a narrow room for political manoeuvre, though one that may yet leave the Swedish model intact if the case can be made for the benefits of more inclusive citizenship rights. Put differently, at a time of growing exclusionary populism, can Sweden show that it can lead the way in providing a more capacious home for all?

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper has been funded by the Swedish Research Council as part of the project 'The Radicalisation of Sweden's Image: A study of how radical right groups in other countries depict Sweden online' (grant number 2021-01609). The author would like to thank the editor of the journal and two very helpful anonymous reviewers for their comments.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ORCID

Ralph Schroeder https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4229-1585

REFERENCES

Anderson, P. (1974) *Lineages of the absolutist state*. London: Verso.

Andersson, J. & Hilson, M. (2009) Images of Sweden and the Nordic countries. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 34(3), 219–228.

Baldwin, P. (2021) *Fighting the first wave: why the coronavirus was tackled so differently across the globe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Berggren, H. & Trägårdh, L. (2022) *The Swedish theory of love: individualism and social Trust in Modern Sweden*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Bhambra, K. & Holmwood, J. (2021) *Colonialism and modern social theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Business Insider. (2020) *Sweden's GDP slumped 8.6% in Q2, more sharply than its neighbors despite its no-lockdown policy*. Available from: https://www.businessinsider.com/coronavirus-sweden-gdp-falls-8pc-in-q2-worse-nordic-neighbors-2020-8?r=US&IR=T [Accessed 11th November 2022]

Byrkjeflot, H., Mordhorst, M. & Petersen, K. (2021) The making and circulation of Nordic models: an introduction. In: Byrkjeflot, H., Mjøset, L., Mordhorst, M. & Petersen, K. (Eds.) *The making and circulation of Nordic models, ideas and images*. London: Routledge, pp. 1–10.

Campbell, J. & Hall, J. (2017) *The paradox of vulnerability: states, nationalism and the financial crisis*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Campbell, J. & Hall, J. (2021) *What capitalism needs: forgotten lessons of great economists*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Childs, M. (1936) *Sweden – the middle way*. London: Faber.

Duina, F. & Carson, D. (2020) Not so right after all? Making sense of the progressive rhetoric of Europe's far-right parties. *International Sociology*, 35(1), 3–21.

Esping-Andersen, G. (1990) *The three worlds of welfare capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Estrada, R.A., Tun, P. & Jörum, E. (2021) Syrians in Sweden: constructing difference regarding gender and family. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(2), 1291–1306.

Evans, R. (2013) Michael Gove's history wars. *The Guardian*. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jul/13/michael-gove-teaching-history-wars [Accessed 1st January 2022]

Fukuyama, F. (2011) *The origins of political order: from prehuman times to the French revolution*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Fukuyama, F. (2014) *Political order and political decay: from the industrial revolution to the globalization of democracy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Global Times. (2021) Thunberg needs a better education and more knowledge to avoid being exploited by West. Available from: https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202111/1237851.shtml [Accessed 1st January 2022]

Irwin, R. (2022) Negotiating COVID-19 in the media: autoethnographic reflections on Sweden and international reporting. In: Ali, I. & Davis-Floyd, R. (Eds.) *Negotiating the pandemic*. London: Routledge, pp. 27–41.

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

Jerdén, B. & Bohman, V. (2019) *China's propaganda campaign in Sweden, 2018–2019*. Swedish Institute of International Affairs. June, 2019 UI Brief No. 4. Available from: https://www.ui.se/english/publications/ui-publications/ [Accessed 1st January 2022]

Lindell, F. & Pelling, L. (2021) *Det Svenska Missnoejet*. Falun: Atlas Bokfoerlaget.

Lipset, S.M. (1996) *American exceptionalism: a double-edged sword*. New York: W.W. Norton.

Lundberg, L.-O. (2005) *Bilder av Sverige i utlandet – en studie om förändringar, nuläge och mätmetoder, [Pictures of Sweden abroad: a study of changes, the current situation, and methods for measuring]*. Utrikesdepartementet [Ministry of Foreign Affairs]. Available from: https://www.regeringen.se/contentassets/9841acbd24994a13847a4ae9288e3e6c/bilder-av-sverige-i-utlandet [Accessed 1st January 2022].

Mann, M. (1988) Ruling class strategies and citizenship. In: *His states, war and capitalism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 188–209.

Mann, M. (2013) *The sources of social power vol.4: globalizations 1945–2011*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mann, M. & Riley, D. (2007) Explaining macro-regional trends in global income inequalities. *Socio-Economic Review*, 5(1), 81–115.

Manor, J. (2020) India's far from neo-liberal economic order in the Modi era. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 55(44), 12–15.

Marklund, C. (2009) The social laboratory, the middle way and the Swedish model: three frames for the image of Sweden. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 34(3), 264–285.

Marklund, C. (2013) A Swedish Norden or a Nordic Sweden. In: Stadius, P. & Harvard, J. (Eds.) *Communicating the north: media structures and images in the making of the Nordic region*. London: Routledge, pp. 263–287.

Martinsson, J. (2020) Vart är Sverige på väg? Folkets syn på utvecklingen i Sverige. In: Andersson, U., Carlander, A. & Öhberg, P. (Eds.) *Regntugna Skyar*. SOM Institute: Gothenburg.

McCluskey, E. (2019) *From righteousness to the far right: an anthropological rethinking of critical security studies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.

Misra, M. (2007) *Vishnu's crowded Temple: India since the great rebellion*. London: Penguin Books.

Naseemullah, A. (2017) The political economy of economic conservatism in India: from moral economy to pro-business nationalism. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 5(2), 233–247.

Our World in Data. (2022) Available from: https://ourworldindata.org/global-economic-inequality [Accessed 28th October 2022].

Pontusson, J. (2005) *Inequality and prosperity: social Europe vs. Liberal America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Rapacioli, P. (2018) *Good Sweden, Bad Sweden*. Stockholm: Volante.

Rom-Jensen, B., Mørkved Hellenes, A., Hilson, M. & Marklund, C. (2023) Modelizing the Nordics: transdiscursive migrations of Nordic models, c. 1965–2020. *Scandinavian Journal of History*, 48(2), 249–271.

Rydgren, J. & van der Meiden, S. (2018) The radical right and the end of Swedish exceptionalism. *European Political Science*, 18, 439–455.

Sanandaji, T. (2020) *Mass challenge: the socioeconomic impact of migration to a Scandinavian welfare state*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schroeder, R. (2013) *An age of limits: social theory for the 21st century*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Selin, H. & Stenberg, J. (2018) Sverige i utländska medier – från välfärdsföredöme till mer komplex bild. [Sweden in foreign media: from Welfare model to a more complex picture]. In: Schwarz, J.A. et al. (Eds.) *Om journalistik och verklighet*. Stockholm: Institutet för mediestudier, pp. 99–119.

Shambaugh, D. (2013) *China goes global: the partial power*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Simons, G. (2020) Swedish government and country image during the international media coverage of the coronavirus pandemic strategy: from bold to pariah. *Journalism and Media*, 1(1), 41–58.

Steinmo, S. (2010) *The evolution of modern states: Sweden, Japan and the United States*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swedish Institute. (2016) *Sverigebilden i Kina*. Available from: https://si.se/sa-arbetar-vi/analyserar-sverigebilden/ [Accessed 4th July 2023]

Swedish Institute. (2018) *Svenska institutet sammanfattar bilden av Sverige 2015–2017*. Available from: https://si.se/sa-arbetar-vi/analyserar-sverigebilden/

Swedish Institute. (2020) *Sverigebilder i Kina: Hur unga storstadsbor i Kina och kinesiska Sverigealumner ser på Sverige*. Available from: https://si.se/sa-arbetar-vi/analyserar-sverigebilden/

The Guardian. (2017) *'Sweden, who would believe this?': Trump cites non-existent terror attack*. Available from: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/feb/19/sweden-trump-cites-non-existent-terror-attack [Accessed 1st January 2022]

The Guardian. (2021) *Greta Thunberg effigies burned in Delhi after tweets on farmers' protests*. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/04/greta-thunberg-effigies-burned-in-delhi-after-tweets-on-farmers-protests [Accessed 1st January 2022]

Turner, B. (1986) *Citizenship and capitalism*. London: Allen and Unwin.

Yan, P., Schroeder, R. & Stier, S. (2021) Is there a link between climate change scepticism and populism? An analysis of web tracking and survey data from Europe and the US. *Information, Communication & Society*, 25, 1400–1439. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1864005

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Ralph Schroeder is Professor in Social Science of the Internet at the Oxford Internet Institute. His recent books include 'Digital Transformations of the Public Arena' (with Andreas Jungherr, 2022). His current research interests include digital media and right-wing populism and the social implications of AI.

How to cite this article: Schroeder, R. (2023) Sweden's image in the world: Still a 'model'? *Global Policy*, 14, 676–685. Available from: https://doi.org/10.1111/1758-5899.13245

17585899, 2023, 5, Downloaded from https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1758-5899.13245 by Test, Wiley Online Library on [05/02/2024]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License