Images of Sweden and the Nordic Countries

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INTRODUCTION

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It is widely acknowledged that recent decades have been marked by a resurgence of nationalism. Many have noted the apparent paradox that, in the era of globalization, national stereotypes, national images and even national brands seem to carry more resonance than ever before.[1] Indeed, the idea of national *peoples,* far from being confined to the nationalist era of the 19th century and inter-war period, has come to dominate European political discourse in the 1990s and 2000s, with politicians in France, Britain and elsewhere making frequent reference to notions of French republican values, Britishness and the like. This phenomenon is also visible in the Nordic countries. Populist nationalist parties of the right such as the Danish People's Party (Dansk Folkeparti), the Progress Party in Norway (Fremskrittsparti) and the True Finns (Perussuomalaiset) have made significant political advances in recent years. In Norway, the commemoration of a centenary of independence in 2005, and the controversial redesign of the iconic National Museum sparked a debate about Norwegian identity, while the current (2009) bi-centenary of the 1808-9 Finnish war (*Finska kriget*/*Suomen sota*) has provoked similar reflections in Finland and Sweden.[2] Meanwhile, in Sweden, recent years have seen a debate on the notion of *Swedishness* and what defines Swedish values, noticeable not only in political proposals for language and citizenship tests, but also in increasing references, in public discourse, to what Sweden is and what kind of modernity it represents.[3]

Although not merely a repetition of older forms of nationalist discourses, the contemporary phenomenon of nationalism is clearly related to ongoing historical processes, drawing on complex historical legacies in its notions of the people, nation, belonging or memory. Most of the time, contemporary nationalism is neither openly xenophobic nor racist, and thus stands in contrast to the aggressive forms of nationalism of the 1930s. Nonetheless, it frequently seems to be linked to perceptions of threats to

the nation state, whether external, in the form of globalization or European integration, or internal in the form of multiculturalism and the growing presence of ethnic minorities.[4] Increasingly, especially since 2001, this fear has been focused on Islam in particular, and the threat that it is perceived to pose to the European version of secular modernity and its democracy and gender equality.

The papers for this special issue all deal with contemporary notions of Sweden and the Swedish, and how these are linked to complex phenomena such as postmodernism, globalization and multiculturalism. The papers examine trajectories in the history of the image of Sweden and the Nordic countries in the 20th century. They do this from perspectives that are international and comparative, and that focus both on the role of Sweden and the Swedish model in Europe and beyond, as well as its significance in the other Nordic and Baltic countries. Two of the papers (those of Andrew Newby and Kazimierz Musiał) are concerned with the Nordic region in its entirety, whereas the others are concerned more specifically with Sweden. While we do not wish to suggest that Sweden is somehow synonymous with the rest of Norden, it must be acknowledged that, as far as most of the rest of the world is concerned, it has nonetheless had the most prominent position in international political discourse. The relationship between images of Sweden and of Scandinavia or *Norden* is discussed in more detail below.

We suggest that for much of the 20th century the idea of Sweden and the Swedish – or indeed Nordic – Model, has functioned as a *utopia* in the political discourse of Europe and beyond, identified as the most modern country in the world. As the Polish social scientist Kazimierz Musiał has shown in his book, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*, the image of ultra-modernity was first, in the 1920s, attached to Denmark as the source of novel ideas about agriculture that larger countries could beneficially emulate.[5] From the 1930s, however, interest in the northern social laboratory switched to Sweden.[6] From American interest in Swedish social engineering and the 'middle way' of the 1930s to late 20th-century debates in British politics, Sweden has come to occupy a position of ultra-modernity, that is somehow even more modern than the other Nordic countries. This is linked, as Musiał points out, to the idea of the Swedes as a peculiarly modern people.[7] In other words, Swedish modernity was not the construction of a particular socio-economic model, but the product of a national instinct and psyche, a frame of mind which meant that the Swedes were more prone to modernity than other peoples. This instinct is associated with the values of reformism and pragmatism, the practical application of rational principles to social problems and in the Swedish notion of the *folk* as solidaristic yet individual, shaped by secular Lutheranism, peace-loving and trusting of government.[8]

For many on the political left in particular, Sweden may have stood as a utopia, but for others these attributes also had dystopian qualities, of course. For Cold Warriors like President Eisenhower, Sweden was the near-communist fellow traveller, where stifling paternalism had produced the undesirable consequences of high rates of suicide and drunkenness.[9] In Roland Huntford's famous polemic from 1971, Sweden was portrayed as the 'new totalitarian' state, whose citizens lived in a state of willing servitude.[10] For others it was a land of drab conformity and melancholy, unrestrained social engineering and control, or, more recently, of self-satisfied smugness and stultifying political correctness.[11]

A utopia is, as Reinhart Koselleck has taught us, a place of the desirable, but also a place of the impossible.[12] Discourses of Sweden, in the international context, therefore

tend to reveal much not only about Sweden and why it is regarded as a model society, but also why the emulation of this society may not be possible in the specific time and place of the observer. This leads to stereotypical representations of political culture and national character, of both the observed and the observer. Thus, what made it impossible for New Labour to 'do a Sweden' in Britain in the 1990s was that the natural conservatism of the British stood in contrast to the inherent progressiveness of the Swedes and their instinct for solidarity. The Swedish model was not exportable, after all.[13] Just like national self-images, the eye of the observer is always selective. Thus Andrew Newby's paper shows how *Norden* 'has been idealised, demonised or otherwise employed' by politicians of varying ideological backgrounds in Scotland, while Andrew Scott's paper on the visit of a delegation of Australian trade unionists to Stockholm in the mid 1980s shows that they were very impressed with the sophistication of the Swedish model, at the same time as it was being disputed domestically. Clearly, people have found what they were looking for in the Swedish model, whether it was the American social scientists of the 1930s seeking vindication of the New Deal, the Australian trade unionists who underestimated the extent of controversy surrounding the wage earners' funds they so much admired, or in the 1990s British New Labour's vision of a so-called progressive consensus.

Utopias are of course time specific, dependent on particular historical contexts. Sweden and the Swedish model have had many different meanings in the 20th century, both utopian and dystopian. The early 21st-century meaning of the 'Swedish model' is that of a welfare state that has successfully adapted its social system and labour markets to an era of globalization. This has very different connotations to Marquis Childs' famous notion of Sweden as a 'middle way' between capitalism and communism, the planned society in which the profits of an efficient market economy were steered and redistributed for the common good. We suggest that the different trajectories in the notion of the Swedish model have followed 20th-century trajectories of European modernity and capitalism. The emergence of the idea of the Swedish middle way in the 1930s was closely linked to the then fate-determining choice of path between capitalism and communism, or between liberal democracy and authoritarian dictatorship.[14] The Swedish model reached the peak of its influence, as the Swedish historian Bo Stråth has pointed out, at the very moment in the 1970s that it began to be challenged, politically by rising discourses of liberalization and deregulation, and socially by the decline of its material base in the traditional industrial sector.[15]

The notion of the Swedish model as the 'middle way' was thus specifically tied to the era of 'organised modernity' from the late 19th century to the mid 1970s. It was also clearly related to the Swedish position of neutrality within the context of the bi-polar divisions of the Cold War in Europe. Inevitably, the demise of these specific conditions has given rise to new interpretations of the meanings accruing to Sweden and the Swedish/Nordic model. In their influential anthology *The Cultural Construction of Norden,* Bo Stråth and Øystein Sørensen suggested that the Nordic countries could be seen as a 'specific egalitarian community of destiny' which had followed a different historical trajectory to the Catholic and capitalist European continent.[16] The roots of this Nordic *Sonderweg* lay not in the specific politics and policies of the 1930s, however, but in the deeper historical past, namely in the development of peasant democracies that were able to reconcile the fundamental post-Enlightenment tension between freedom and equality. This meant that the Nordic societies were able to combine social solidarity and

equality with a 'deep and enduring culturally conditioned individual orientation'.[17] The Nordic 'middle way' was thus rooted in the 18th century Enlightenment, or even the 16th-century Reformation: the quickest, most peaceful and most complete religious transformation in Europe.[18]

Although the thesis of historical exceptionalism over a long period can sometimes be overstated, it has undoubtedly been influential. In Sweden, historians such as Eva Österberg and Peter Aronsson have argued that the 20th-century model of 'consensual politics' was rooted in the institutions for local peasant democracy in the early modern period.[19] Meanwhile, there are signs of a growing interest in external images of the region as presented through historical travel writing, among scholars from within the Nordic region and beyond.[20]

While we are not seeking here to question the validity of the Nordic *Sonderweg* in long historical perspective, we wish nonetheless to acknowledge the significance of these debates in shaping contemporary perceptions of the image of Sweden and *Norden*. With the beginnings of the decline of the Swedish model in the 1970s, all the elements of the image of Sweden have been fundamentally challenged: not necessarily overruled or dismissed, but overwritten with new layers of meaning, contested in new ways, and reinvented as the sources of new political and cultural struggles. As one leading European historian has commented on historical memory during the 1990s, 'What we are witnessing . . . is a sort of interregnum, a moment between myths when the old versions of the past are either redundant or unacceptable, and new ones have yet to surface'.[21] Where previously historians have focused their attention on the 1930s as the period of genesis of the 20th-century image of Sweden, the papers in this issue also point to the 1990s as another, equally important, watershed in the creation of Nordic identity.

Thus, Kazimierz Musiał, in his contribution to this issue, suggests that notions of Sweden and *Norden* have changed fundamentally in the post-modern era, where the strategic geo-political space once occupied by *Norden* as a semantic, cultural, political and geographic entity has increasingly been replaced by the idea of the Baltic. Following the Danish scholar Olle Wæver, Musiał suggests that the loss of the traditional Nordic position as the hope of the world has produced a kind of Nordic nostalgia, a sense of a lost future.[22] This strand is developed further in Jenny Andersson's paper on 'People's home' nostalgia in Sweden following the 1990s crisis. Musiał's paper shows how academics (of which the so-called Copenhagen School of international relations was especially influential), politicians and policy-makers played active roles in seeking to construct new images for the Nordic region, based for example on the concept of 'active internationalism'.

All the papers in this issue make one important claim, that the construction of images of Sweden and Norden is a reflexive process, where self-images meet the gaze of the Other in a mutually reinforcing way. They do this by examining the role of personal networks and transfers of ideas in specific settings, such as the personal and individual contacts which forged the links between Swedes and Australians in the 1980s (in Andrew Scott's paper) and Swedes and Americans in the 1930s and 1940s (in Carl Marklund's paper). Nikolas Glover examines the activities of the Swedish Institute (SI) in promoting (and eventually selling) a positive image of Sweden abroad. Fearful of a possibly tarnished Swedish reputation after the Second World War, because of its neutral stance, the SI was very conscious of its role to promote a positive image of Sweden at a time when, as Carl Marklund's paper shows, an image of Sweden was also

being formed externally in the eyes of Americans. Interestingly, though, the SI was also wary of pursuing a marketing strategy that might be perceived as too aggressive and thus 'un-Swedish'. The marketing of Sweden had to be performed in ways that were compatible with the image that was being sold – of Sweden as a modern, moderate and neutral country.

As Carl Marklund shows, American social science was especially important in promoting the image of Sweden as the social laboratory, but the encounter between auto- and xeno-stereotypes also took place closer to home. The end of the Cold War in 1989–91 meant that the idea of *Norden* gained a new significance within the Baltic. For newly independent Estonia, *Norden* offered, for a time during the 1990s at least, a means to turn its back on the Soviet era and 'return home to Europe'. This narrative of 'returning to Europe' in Estonia was mirrored by the notion, in Danish political discourse at least, of 'returning to the Baltic', and of reviving old trade and cultural links disrupted by the iron curtain.[23] For Sweden, 'return to the Baltic' also offered the opportunity to atone for past transgressions such as the forced repatriation of Estonian refugees during the Second World War.

Even closer to home, the image of Sweden was also formed in relation to other Nordic countries. These papers thus also allow us to rethink the category of *Norden* (or Scandinavia which is often used synonymously in the English-speaking world). 'Sweden' is by no means synonymous with 'Norden', of course, though it has often stood as the silent reference point for what is considered Nordic or Scandinavian. Indeed, for much of the 20th century Sweden seems to have occupied a hegemonic position in Nordic discourses. For all the other Nordic countries, with the possible exception of Iceland, the relationship with Sweden was essential to how these countries identified themselves as Nordic. For Denmark, for example, Sweden was the cold and forbidding Other that reinforced Danish self-images of cosiness and *hygge*. More recently this has been replaced by a Danish image of Sweden as stifled by political correctness, based on the divergent approaches to multiculturalism in the two countries.[24] For Norway, Sweden was the patronising elder brother, always threatening to dominate the lopsided post-union relationship, even though thousands of Swedish young people have recently found work in the high wage Norwegian service sector. [25]

As the Finnish historian Max Engman has commented, the elision of Swedishness and modernity was perhaps strongest of all in Finland during much of the post-war period: 'in no other country was there the same readiness to accept Swedish ideas and social innovations'.[26] This was not merely because of the historic ties between the two countries and the presence of the Swedish-speaking minority in Finland. Mass emigration meant that Sweden was home to many Finns from the 1960s or even earlier, with the boat from Helsinki to Stockholm offering a route *west* to prosperity. Monika Janfelt's observation on the inter-war period – 'Norden had a function in Finland, just as Finland served a function for Norden' – could as easily be applied to the period after 1945.[27] As Tapio Bergholm has pointed out, only since the economic crisis of the 1990s did the notion of the *Finnish* model 'become more permanently established in Finnish and international social science debates'.[28]

The upheavals of the 1990s have altered not only the meanings of *Norden* within Europe, but also the dynamics of relationships within the region. The aftermath of the recovery from the severe recession of the early 1990s in Finland saw the emergence of a new cosmopolitan, self-confident and above all more modern identity which rejected

the ties with Sweden and embraced wholeheartedly instead membership of the European Union. At the same time, the Nordic model itself became nationalized, so that scholars and politicians alike began to talk of a separate Finnish model based on technical innovation, education and creativity; a Danish model based on the concept of 'flexicurity'; and a Norwegian model based on international solidarity and responsible use of the vast oil revenues.[29] Indeed, as Andrew Newby's contribution to this special issue shows, since 1997 the Nordic countries have been cited as utopic examples of small, wealthy and above all independent North Atlantic states by the Scottish National Party, as part of its campaign for independence from the UK. The financial and economic crisis which began in 2008 severely tarnished the image of the Icelandic model of prosperity based on the financial sector of course, but at the same time policy-makers and journalists also turned to the Swedish and Finnish experiences of the early 1990s for examples of how the state could successfully intervene in the banking sector.[30]

While our papers are mostly concerned with social science and social policy, they also pay attention to the role of culture and cultural stereotypes. Jenny Andersson's paper shows how the concept of the 'People's home' has again become ethnicized in recent discourse. This is partly based on the notion of the Swedes as a people gifted with a particularly progressive mentality, but also on the interaction of nostalgic ideas about the people's home and the aesthetic ideals of Nordic modernity: the 'pure and simple lines' of functionalism that were demonstrated to the world at the Stockholm exhibition of 1930.[31] The 1990s witnessed a revival of interest in Nordic design, both in its more exclusive variants such as the work of Alvar Aalto and the designers of the Danish Modern school, as well as in its mass-market manifestations such as IKEA and Nokia handsets. This arguably offers a new and important dimension to the relationship between the categories of Nordic and modern. Once again, the emergence of this image lies at the intersection of the conscious promotion of the auto-stereotype with the xeno-stereotype. For example, the Swedish Institute has been charged, in the 1990s, with selling Swedish design, an activity which was identified as crucial for economic growth in the Swedish government's innovation strategy.[32] This is to some extent paradoxical, given the often critical function of art and culture in the history of Nordic modernity.[33] Film, literature and art has often sought to challenge the fundamental elements of notions such as the people's home or the Swedish model, presenting a rather dystopian view that runs counter to the optimism of the social scientists in their search for model societies. For several generations of cinema-going Europeans their principal encounter with the idea of Sweden was through the work of Ingmar Bergman, often valued for its melancholic pessimism. A similar bleakness can be perceived in the work of contemporary auteurs such as von Trier and Kaurismäki, perhaps, but above all in the immensely popular contemporary thriller and detective fiction, of which Henning Mankell is probably the best example.[34]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1   Hettne, Sörlin and Østergård, *Den globala nationalismen*, 23, 39.
2   Burch, 'Norway and 1905', 2–3; Engman, 'Var och hur skall vi fira 2008–2009?'. See also the official commemorative year website: http://www.1809.fi/etusivu/fi.jsp (accessed 20 May 2009).
3   See Berggren and Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa?*
4   Trägårdh, 'Welfare State Nationalism'; Pred, 'Memory and the Cultural Reworking of Crisis'.
5   Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*, 31, 42–66.
6   Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*, 75, 89. See also Carl Marklund's paper in this issue.
7   See also Ruth, 'The Second New Nation'.
8   See Stråth, 'Introduction. Nordic Modernity', 77.
9   Logue, 'The Swedish Model', 164.
10 Huntford, *The New Totalitarians*; see also Hale, 'Brave New World in Sweden?'
11 See for example, Postgate, 'Journey to Sweden'; Friedman and Friedman, 'Sverige: från nationalstat till pluralt samhälle'.
12 Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History*.
13 Andersson, 'The People's Library and the Electronic Workshop'.
14 Childs, *Sweden – the Middle Way*; see also Cole and Smith, eds., *Democratic Sweden*; Simon, *The Smaller Democracies*; Aucante, 'La chasse au modèle'.
15 Stråth, *Folkhemmet mot Europa*.
16 Sørensen and Stråth, 'Introduction: The Cultural Construction of Norden', 20.
17 Sørensen and Stråth, 'Introduction: The Cultural Construction of Norden', 21.
18 Knudsen, ed., *Den nordiske protestantisme og velfærdsstaten*, 11, 42.
19 Österberg, 'Bönder och centralmakt i det tidigmoderna Sverige'; Aronsson, *Bönder gör politik*; for critique see Harnesk, 'Den svenska modellens tidigmoderna rötter?'
20 Stadius, *Resan till norr*; Wells, ed., *The Discovery of Nineteenth-Century Scandinavia*; Wawn, *The Vikings and the Victorians*.
21 Judt, 'The Past is Another Country', 315.
22 Wæver, 'Nordic Nostalgia'.
23 Lauristin, 'Contexts of Transition', 26–40. See also Kazimierz Musiał's contribution to this volume.
24 Niklas Johansson, 'Sverige og Danmark: Nu svider sandheden i Sverige', *Politiken*, 31 March 2006; Kristian Lindberg, 'I er alt for overfladiske', *Berlingske Tidende*, 15 November 2006.
25 Sejersted, *Socialdemokratins tidsålder*.
26 Engman, 'Är Finland ett nordiskt land?' 72.
27 Janfelt, *Att leva i det bästa av världar*, 149.
28 Bergholm, 'The Making of the Finnish Model', 29. For example, see Andersson, Kosonen and Vartiainen, *The Finnish Model of Economic and Social Policy*; Saari, ed., *Suomen malli*; both cited in Bergholm, 'The Making of the Finnish Model'.
29 'Flexicurity', *The Economist*, 7 September 2006; Ornston, 'Reorganising Adjustment'; Bergholm, 'The Making of the Finnish Model'.
30 Purvis, 'Sweden's Model Approach to Financial Disaster'.
31 Pred, *Recognizing European Modernities*; Andersson, 'Baklänges in i framtiden: om folkhemsnostalgi och andra framtidsvisioner'.

32   Lundberg and Tydén, *Sverigebilder*, 19–21. See also Nikolas Glover's contribution to this volume.
33   Wiklund, *I det modernas landskap*, 91.
34   On Scandinavian detective fiction see, for example, Nestingen, *Crime and Fantasy in Scandinavia*.

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