Sweden: the reluctant nation

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Published by Counterpoint 2012

www.counterpoint.uk.com

ISBN: 978-0-9568225-7-4
Copy edited by: Julie Pickard
Series design by modernactivity
Typeset by modernactivity
Printed by Lecturis
Text & cover paper: Munken Print White
Set in **Transport** & Scala

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Acknowledgements
Counterpoint would like to thank the Open Society Foundations for their generous support of the project 'Recapturing Europe's Reluctant Radicals'.

1

Paradise gained

I grew up in a small industrial town south of Stockholm. My father was a Polish Jew, a survivor of Auschwitz, brought to Sweden by the Red Cross in the summer of 1945. My mother was a survivor of Auschwitz too, joining my father in 1946. Sweden had committed itself to receive a limited number of people from 'the camps', to recover from their sufferings until they were strong enough to go elsewhere. The Swedish minister of social affairs at the time, Gustav Möller, stated to a reluctant *Riksdagen* (Parliament) that the Swedish government had found it difficult 'to reject requests of this kind'.[1] Eventually thirty thousand survivors were received by Sweden, among them ten thousand Jews. Most of them stayed longer than a few months; a few thousand permanently. Among them, my parents.

At the time Sweden was a country with few foreigners and little interest in having more. The leading national daily, *Dagens Nyheter*, warned in September 1945 against the potentially dire consequences of allowing the survivors to stay: 'We are not accustomed to deal with people who are so alien to Swedish mores and standards.'[2] Another daily, *Expressen*, wrote: 'It will not be easy for them [the survivors] to adapt and not easy for anyone to employ them. For the latter is demanded far more of tireless understanding and generous humanity than can be expected of the average.'[3] The fact that Sweden a few years later (1948) registered more than a hundred

thousand foreigners, or rather foreign workers, did not necessarily imply that Sweden had changed from averseness to acceptance, only that Sweden's need of foreign labour was larger than its aversion to foreigners.

At war's end Sweden was a nation in which the criteria for belonging and inclusion were enigmatic and demanding, with a host of unwritten codes and customs that it would take a generation or two to fully decipher and assimilate. In addition, Sweden had been spared the devastations of the European wars and was therefore not directly touched by the experiences shared by most foreigners. In Sweden the fabric of society had remained mostly intact, no generations were lost, no national pride was hurt, no political visions were shattered. The emerging Swedish welfare project of the 1930s could take off from where it had been interrupted, as if there had been no war. Where the rest of Europe had to confront and reconsider tarnished national myths and narratives, no such thing was necessary in Sweden. The non-war experience had rather reinforced the self-image of Sweden as a more peaceful, more rational, more advanced and more humane society than the conflict-ridden nations on the Continent. A somewhat paradoxical self-image undoubtedly, since there was a time when mothers on 'the Continent' used to threaten their disobedient children with the Swedes – a living collective memory from the 17th century when the brutish armies of Sweden roamed their countries.

In the small town where I grew up in the early 1950s there were few foreigners, and even fewer Jews. I was the only dark-haired kid on the block. The perks of the new Paradise – work, security, social advancement and economic well-being – however, seemed to be within reach of newcomers as well. There was nothing yet to shake the notion of Sweden as a society rapidly moving towards social bliss for all. In the local newspaper you

could read about reforms that made people of the older generations pinch their arms in disbelief: 'As a start we will provide every mother with free natal care and cash benefits. From the day of birth to the age of sixteen we will ease the economic burden of families with children through yearly cash supplements. In addition we will pay for their child care. We shall subsidise housing for large segments of the population. In our schools the children will be given free lunches, free dental care, and free trips abroad during the summer recess. When new generations enter the labour market they will be financially secured against unemployment, illness and accidents. If need be there will be social assistance, *socialhjälp*, [provided by the state] replacing the [local] poorhouse, *fattigvård*.'[4]

There was already a name for this society, *folkhemmet*, or People's Home, with apparent association to the more ominously sounding German *Volksgemeinschaft*. The term was originally coined by the Swedish nationalist and conservative politician Rudolf Kjellén in the early 1900s. He also coined the even more ominous term National Socialism (well before it was appropriated by a certain German Party), by which he denoted the idea of a cohesive community based on common national and ethnic roots. Kjellén viewed society as an organism in which the People constituted an indivisible whole and in which distinctions of class, status and ancestry were superseded by the common bonds of nation and home. Kjellén was certainly not a democrat; *folkhemmet*, as he imagined it, was a hierarchical and corporatist construction, populated by people defined by their distinct and fixed functions, professions and positions, justly managed by a benevolent patron, in the case of Kjellén, a constitutional monarch.

In 1928 the term *folkhemmet* was nevertheless appropriated by the Swedish Social Democrats and would henceforth denote a tight-knit national

community striving for a class-transcending social order based on peace, justice, progress and democracy.

The Social Democrats became Nationalists and the nation became Social Democratic.

2

A brief history of Swedishness

This ideal of *folkhemmet* inevitably begged the question of who was a bona fide member of the national community and who was not. The notion of Swedishness, *svenskhet*, thus came to play an important role in the emerging narrative of *folkhemmet*. Originally part of a national-romantic myth about the origins and nature of the Swedish nation, it now also entered the rhetoric of leading Social Democrats. Notions of race, roots and social fitness were frequently invoked. The mentally ill and other 'social misfits' became the objects of forced sterilisations. Jews, Romas (*gypsies*) and Travellers (*tattare*) were regular targets of prejudice and disdain. Anti-semitic jokes and slurs were ingrained in the national discourse. Sweden became home to the first governmental Institute for Racial Biology (in 1922), which turned Swedishness (and non-Swedishness) into a matter of skull form and facial profile. The radical homogenising ambitions of the architects of *folkhemmet*, with the state reaching into the most private spheres of human life such as reproduction, child-rearing, personal hygiene and food habits, demanded high levels of public trust and a strong sense of cultural affinity.

The Swedish Social Democrats of the inter-war years were intensely preoccupied with discussing and defining the specific and unique traits of the Swedish national character. Swedes were 'democrats at heart', stated Social Democratic party leader and prime minister Per Albin Hansson in a speech in 1933. 'They love freedom and

hate repression [...] but they also want the state to keep the order, harness avarice and excess, help all to work and sustenance, make it safe and good to toil and live in old Sweden.' In theory *folkhemmet* was to be open to all Swedes, but in practice there was a condition at the entrance: the adherence to a specific 'Swedish way of life'.[5]

The latter was the title of a widespread educational brochure published during the war (1942).[6] The Swedish form of life, it said, had been moulded over centuries and even millennia, creating a homogenous people with a common history, a common religion and a common national character. The Swedes were anti-authoritarian, cooperative, independent, strong-minded, consensus-prone, with an innate sense of justice, sharing the 'instincts' of an ancient people. Swedishness was a home-grown quality, owing very little or nothing to foreign influences and 'imports'.

The strength of this both nationalist and socialist narrative was first and foremost its remarkable success. In contrast to Germany, where similar ideas had fomented extremism, polarisation and social unrest, the Swedish experiment in 'national socialism' was a democratising and socially pacifying venture based on a tradition of consensus, with historical roots in the creation in the mid-1600s of strong civil service departments, *ämbetsverk*, with the purpose to consolidate central control of a vast and still splintered nation. A distinctive feature of these new departments was their collegiate leadership. Decisions were taken by a group of men, a *collegium*, not by single individuals, creating over time a specific culture of bureaucratic independence and self-importance. While these *collegia* became efficient tools in the forging of a centralised Swedish state and undoubtedly strengthened the king's control of the country, they also restricted his autocratic prerogatives. Most royal initiatives henceforth had to be examined through the cool prism of an

independent state bureaucracy and to have their merits weighed against new standards of reason and rationality. A language of matter-of-factness began to cloak and disarm potential conflicts between king and administration. This specific culture of administrative independence and impartiality, *ämbetsmannakulturen*, was further strengthened by the large influx of young, educated, and to nobility, elevated commoners, into the services of the rapidly expanding and incessantly warring Swedish state. Thus was created an extensive class of 'lower' nobility, promoted on the basis of education and administrative skill rather than on traditional aristocratic virtues and prerogatives. This contributed to an exceptional social mobility in Swedish society at the time, making the step from yeoman to nobleman not only feasible but also sometimes rapid. Towards the end of the century Sweden had five times more noblemen than during any year of the preceding century. This actual and potential social mobility created a link between separate strata of the Swedish population. The mental universe of Swedish yeomen was thus formed in a specific sphere of 'facts and representations', creating, among other elements, a preference for common solutions in 'a spirit of consensus'.

In Sweden of the 1930s this spirit most likely contributed to a historic compromise between the employers' central organisation (SAF) and the central organisation of the labour unions (LO), instituting in 1936 the 'Spirit of Saltsjöbaden'. This essentially corporatist arrangement (delegating state power to non-state civic organisations) was the emblematic foundation of 'the Swedish model', arguably creating the conditions for social peace, economic growth and extensive welfare reforms.

3

Welfare for all

A central feature of the emerging *folkhemmet* was its class-transcending ambitions. Government subsidies of health care, housing and child support were to be accorded to each and every citizen, rich or poor, on the basis of general and well-defined rules and not on the basis of discretional means testing. This also gave the middle class a stake in the welfare state, adding to its status as a genuine expression of 'the Swedish form of life'. Such a general and indiscriminating welfare system naturally presumed high levels of public trust, low levels of corruption and strong bonds of class-transcending loyalty, which in fact came to be the peculiar characteristics of *folkhemmet*. This, at least for a time, created a virtuous circle, reinforcing and widening the popular support for, and trust in, the Social Democratic project.

Another explanation of why the narrative of *folkhemmet* so rapidly captured the Swedish collective imagination and became a defining feature of Swedishness was its claim to a presumed Swedish tradition of enlightened reason and principled pragmatism. The national experience of a long and unbroken period of inner and outer peace further reinforced the image of *folkhemmet* as a haven of rational prudence in a world of irrational emotions and conflicts, while Swedishness was propagated as the foundation of it all. When ten (!) German-Jewish physicians in 1938 pleaded for asylum in Sweden, there were massive protests by Swedish student organisations,

invoking the foreigners' incompatibility with Swedishness and the threat to the prudent Swedish race (*folkstam*).

On the other hand, making democracy the foundation of Social Democratic nationalism effectively served to hinder the emergence of anti-democratic and xenophobic parties and movements. The political terrain of both right-wing and left-wing radicalism was effectively occupied by the joint national and socialist narrative of *folkhemmet*. In the political and economic turbulence of the 1930s, Sweden in effect became the reluctant nation, wary of extremism, unwilling to endanger its welfare project through foreign alliances and military adventures, making neutrality a national posture and the construction of *folkhemmet* a national priority.

This element of reluctance became even more apparent when Sweden, through a combination of luck, opportunism and geopolitics, managed to stay out of yet another European war. The claimed rationality of Swedishness was thereby more firmly integrated into the national self-image, as were the virtues of neutrality.

Effectively then, the Swedish model came out stronger and more self-confident than before. Projects and reforms that had been interrupted by the war were resumed and even radicalised. A devastated world had to be rebuilt and the unharmed Swedish industry was in a unique position to provide whatever was needed to do it – steel, trucks, timber – creating a Swedish post-war boom that made even the most costly welfare reforms seem within reach. Uncontaminated by the memories of war, cut loose from the chains of history, liberated from national aggressions and emotions, Sweden was to become a model society heralding a new era of peace and progress.

It was in this post-war Paradise of never-darkening horizons that my young parents were expected to make a new life for themselves after Auschwitz. The tacit condition was that they rid themselves of the unbearable

memories of the past and fully submit to a society based on collective oblivion and moral self-righteousness. No wonder perhaps, that Swedishness to them remained a strange and unattainable quality and Sweden a world apart. At the same time Sweden actively recruited foreign workers to meet the continuous shortage of labour in the booming Swedish economy. Into the post-war narrative of *folkhemmet* was thus also incorporated the story of successful immigration and assimilation, testifying to the universal significance of the Swedish model.

They were to be called 'the record years', these years of seemingly endless social progress and boundless optimism. A contemporary Danish-born observer, the journalist and writer Jytte Bonnier, later noted: 'Rationalism was the highway of Swedish thinking and materialism the fuel of the Swedish welfare project [...] Science and technology showed the way, planning was the order of the day: This was something completely different from the pragmatic view of life characterising my home country [...] We had two separate traditions and mentalities...'[7]

4

The secularised church

The distinctive Swedish blend of hard-to-penetrate cultural codes and claims to a universal culture of reason and rationality was perhaps most clearly manifest in the role of religion in Sweden. Up to the post-war period Sweden could reasonably be described as a monolithic state-church society with a distinct and visible Lutheran cultural identity. Linked to the ideal of a People's Home was the Lutheran ideal of a People's Church, *folkkyrka*, originating in Germany in the 1880s and particularly cherished by Christian Social Democrats. The Church of Sweden thus came to be identified with the state and the state identified with the church and protected its interests; the church relinquished its moral and spiritual independence from the state while the state provided it with a *de jure* monopoly on religious affairs. Prior to 1860 the only organised Christian denomination allowed was the Lutheran. Thereafter you could leave the Church of Sweden only if you joined another Christian denomination approved by the state. Full freedom of religion was not instituted in Sweden until 1951, and the formal separation between church and state in Sweden took place only in 2000.

All this made for a culturally entrenched state religion indivisibly intertwined with the national and social ambitions of modern Sweden. The Church of Sweden not only refrained from challenging the mainly secular foundations of this enterprise, but largely served to support and legitimise them. The Church became progressively secularised, if you will, imbued with the

emerging tenets of reason and rationality, owing its power less to its spiritual authority than to its role as the official custodian of semi-religious national traditions and specific matters of state (such as population registration).

When this increasingly anachronistic position was publicly challenged in the late 1940s it triggered a fierce public debate that lasted several years and in which the church more or less conceded the high ground to its secular critics, or rather, claimed the critics' ground for itself. The church had no argument with secularism, it was said. Reason was not alien to religion but part and parcel of it. The dogmas of the church were no longer seen as incompatible with secular principles. In fact, the debate did not so much pit the tenets of reason against the tenets of faith, as it revealed the tacit cultural bonds between church and state in Swedish society.

Religion in Sweden thus became the great invisible in the narrative construction of Swedishness, adding yet another component to its peculiar fusion of tradition and modernity, religion and reason, cultural exclusion and political inclusion. Although the Christian roots of modern Sweden are rarely acknowledged there is no doubt that the self-professed secular nature of modern Swedishness is deeply steeped in a Lutheran tradition of national self-sufficiency and moral rectitude. Beneath the claims to universal tolerance and cultural openness, Sweden remains a society with a historically short experience of cultural and religious pluralism and therefore remains somewhat uncomfortable in confronting cultural and religious difference. A foreign surname and a foreign accent, not to mention foreign social codes and un-Swedish manners might still make a difference between being employed or not.

At the same time Sweden, perhaps more than any other European country, subscribed to an official policy of openness, acceptance and tolerance towards new

immigrants. Although labour immigration to Sweden formally came to a halt in the late 1970s, it was soon to be replaced by a relatively generous policy for the reception and absorption of asylum seekers and, eventually, of their extended families. This has dramatically changed the demographic make-up of Sweden, where 15 per cent of the population, 1.4 million, is now foreign-born (as of 2010). In some urban areas the share of inhabitants with a foreign background is approaching 90 per cent.

A fairly large influx of non-European asylum-seekers has thus challenged the official policy of multicultural integration by going hand in hand with a growing socio-economic divide along cultural and ethnic lines. Unemployment and poverty have hit the foreign-born part of the population significantly harder than the rest of the population. So far the narrative of a rational, pluralistic and tolerant society open to all has prevailed over the narrative of a homogeneous society threatened by immigrants feeding off the welfare state, introducing alien religious beliefs and practices while refusing to adapt to Swedish norms and traditions.

5

A culture of cultural blindness

Nevertheless, the latter narrative seems to be gaining influence. This change of political atmosphere was not only manifested in the election in 2010 of an openly nationalist and anti-immigration party (*Sverigedemokraterna*, the Sweden Democrats) to the Swedish *Riksdagen*, but is also evident in the appearance of a new 'muscular liberalism' (to borrow a term from David Cameron) calling for the state to impose enlightened Swedish manners and traditions on recalcitrant foreigners.

This Jacobin impulse to pursue a policy of coerced secularism, claiming its universal and culturally neutral character, is however deeply steeped in a most specific Swedish cultural tradition. What to Swedes might seem a matter of enforcing universal principles against archaic and irrational religious and cultural practices, is in fact the imposition of an invisible majority culture, largely formed by the conflation of secularised Lutheranism with Lutheran secularism. This has served to make the Swedish national narrative remarkably unaware of its own cultural premises and prejudices. The very notion of culture (not to mention multi-culture) has mainly come to be associated with foreign traditions and lifestyles, whereas the cultural peculiarities of the distinctly Swedish claim to universal reason and rationality have been largely invisible in the emerging landscape of cultural pluralism.

It is thus important to recognise the extent to which this particular cultural feature of Swedishness

has continued to define a distinctly majoritarian view on issues concerning the relation between private and public, individualism and collectivism, rationality and irrationality. It is precisely this cultural amalgam that explains why a number of Lutheran ministers have been prepared to close ranks with professed atheist ('humanist') critics of religion against what are perceived as irrational foreign religious beliefs and practices.

A recent case in point was a petition by a group of people, including a well-known minister of the Church of Sweden, to outlaw male child circumcision, i.e. a cultural and religious practice almost exclusively associated with two religious minorities, Jews and Muslims. Among the signatories was also a former leader of the Liberal Party and minister of social affairs, who at the same time as he was publicly ostracising Jews and Muslims for their religious practices, was chairing a governmental commission on how to combat xenophobia and intolerance. The petition was ceremoniously shrouded in the language of reason and progress, maintaining that it was solely motivated by the protection of the child against religious coercion and the imperatives of universal human rights. Its harsh characterisation of those practising male child circumcision however betrayed its tacitly anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim nature. Parents circumcising their male infants were thus compared to child molesters: 'To show empathy and respect for adults who wish to cut into the healthy bodies of their children is to turn the back on the children.' The article further made a comparison between male infant circumcision and an imaginary religious custom to cut off children's ear lobes. The article concluded: 'Sweden cannot be considered a progressive country with regard to human rights if we continue to compromise the bodily integrity of children. When approximately 3000 male bodies per year are *religiously mutilated* [italics added] in Sweden, we cannot

rightfully call our engagement with human rights anything but half-hearted.'[8]

In the ensuing debate the anti-circumcision activists further argued that their position was only a matter of secular reason against religious superstition. In yet another article, the former leader of the Liberal Party dwelled in detail upon the irrationality of the Jews, adhering to a fictional Biblical covenant and obeying archaic instructions from their 'high priests' (a term frequently used in the Gospels to denote the Jewish accusers of Jesus). Instead the Jews should be '*mature enough* [italics added] to accept the principle that every child from birth has the same rights as other persons, including the inviolable right to freedom from bodily changes they have not consented to and which are not medically motivated'.[9]

Nowhere in the articles attacking circumcision was there any mentioning of the fact that infant children, from their birth, are constantly and unavoidably subjected to adult interventions that infringe on their 'right' to self-determination. Also within the Swedish majority culture the 'healthy bodies' of infants are allowed to be irreversibly changed on other than medical grounds. Aesthetically motivated surgery (i.e. improving the shape of ears, sexual organs, teeth) is regularly done at the request of parents and without the consent of the child. To this should be added the irreversible psychological and physical effects of unhealthy food, unhealthy habits, dangerous sports and parental neglect. It can reasonably be argued that the baptising of infants is another transgression of the child's right to self-determination. In any case, the child is not asked whether it wishes to join a particular religious community, which is what baptising is all about.

In yet another attack on irrational religious practices, a prominent public figure within the Left Party (*Vänsterpartiet*, the former Communist Party)

suggested that each and every child should be protected against 'all religious practices' up to the age of 12.

By whom and how? one might ask.

And by what rationality is a fictitious right of the child to self-determination to replace the actual rights of parents to raise their children according to their beliefs and best abilities? And what is to be done about the 'infringements' on the child by the particular social and cultural environment into which it is born? Call the police?

What was then presented as a straightforward application of universal human rights to an offensive religious practice was in fact an attempt to impose the norms of a majority culture on the norms of cultural minorities.

This conspicuous blindness to the cultural roots of the anti-circumcision campaign in particular, and Swedish secularism in general, is perhaps indicative of the extent to which the Swedish national narrative is still coloured by the conflation of Swedishness with universal morality and rationality. This perhaps also serves to explain the astonishing unawareness among the church ministers supporting the anti-circumcision campaign of the long and dire tradition of Christian anti-Judaism. Unlike several churches in post-war Europe, the Church of Sweden has not deemed it necessary to expunge the anti-Jewish elements from its sermons and rituals. On the contrary it has further developed its peculiar Swedish claim to a religious tradition of universal enlightenment and rationality. Not surprisingly then, the Church of Sweden has been a haven for supersessionist theology: the idea that Christianity has superseded Judaism. In the specific Swedish context, this has been interpreted as Christianity being the embodiment of universal human rights and principles, while Judaism has been branded as the embodiment of archaic, outdated and particularistic rites and rules.

When finally (six months later) a small group of female only (!) Church representatives, among them two bishops, publicly criticised the anti-circumcision campaign, they perceptively noted its xenophobic implications and its roots in the Swedish majority culture: 'The debate tends to associate everything you like with its being Swedish, while associate everything you dislike with its being un-Swedish and uncivilised. Not only [the nationalist] Sweden Democrats but also other groups are speaking of human rights as something Swedish [...], as something that "the foreigners" must learn to live with in Sweden.'[10]

I believe this amalgam of national enlightenment and cultural self-righteousness has made the Swedish narrative noticeably ambiguous: on the one hand the inviting myth of *folkhemmet*, a generous welfare state open to all; on the other hand the dissuading myth of Swedishness, i.e. a particular Swedish way of life based on a deep-rooted ethnic and cultural tradition, hard to emulate and penetrate. The conflation of these seemingly irreconcilable myths has arguably fomented a national culture largely blind to its own cultural peculiarities and prone to disavow the peculiarities of other cultures. This then has made for a national narrative predicated on the success of a particular social order, the Swedish model, as well as on the cultural hegemony of a particular set of values and traditions. One might therefore expect that the weakening of the social model and the challenge to the hegemonic status of Swedishness would eventually undermine the authority of the Swedish narrative and provoke a growing resentment among those aversely affected by its demise.

6

Paradise lost

As a young journalist in the early 1970s, working at the central news service of the Social Democratic press, I one day came across a government working paper discussing the prospect of a 'reform pause', a term previously unheard of. The idea that the reform process, for one reason or another, would come to a halt was completely alien to the Social Democratic creed. The construction of the People's Home was far from being finished, and I was rebuked for bringing forth unsubstantiated rumours. There could be no such thing as a reform pause.

It is hard to pinpoint the exact moment when the success story starts to crack, but the promise of boundless material and social welfare begins to reveal its fine-print qualifications already in the late 1960s. The symbolic event was perhaps the wildcat strikes in 1969 and 1970 among 5000 workers in the large iron mines of Kiruna and Gällivare in the far north of Sweden. Not only did the strikes, which lasted for almost two months, challenge the social contract of the 1930s between capital and labour, trading labour peace for material growth and social welfare, but it also called into question the promise itself. The strikers not only demanded higher wages but also a halt to the increasing pressures on working conditions to meet growing demands for higher productivity. The wildcat strikes would continue throughout the 1970s as the social contract started to crumble and for all practical purposes came to an end in the late 1970s. It was followed by a period of weakened political consensus about the

Swedish model. While the Social Democrats and their trade union affiliates were radicalised in their efforts to restore and pursue the promise of *folkhemmet*, the employers' federation and the liberal-conservative opposition (which came to power in 1976 after 44 years of continuous Social Democratic rule) increasingly began to argue for a 'system change', *systemskifte*, thereby challenging the basic tenets of the Social Democratic post-war order. This happened to coincide with first oil crisis in 1973 and the ensuing difficulties to sustain competitiveness in a number of Swedish base industries. The 1970s saw dramatic closures and large layoffs in textiles, shipbuilding, and pulp and paper, with production moving to countries with lower labour costs and fewer social obligations. The textile industry largely moved to Portugal, the shipyards to Japan, and the pulp and paper industry to North America.

The Social Democrats and the Trade Union Federation responded to these developments and the growing discontent within its own ranks, by proposing radical schemes to increase workers' influence on corporate decisions. The most far-reaching of these was a proposal to create collective wage-earner funds, *löntagarfonder*, by which the workers, through their unions, would receive partial 'democratic' ownership over private Swedish enterprises. 'This is a thorough reformation of society',[11] stated Rudolf Meidner, a prominent economist of the trade union federation, LO, and the leading mind behind the proposal: 'We wish to deprive the old owners of capital of that power which comes with ownership. All experience shows that influence and control are not enough. Ownership plays a crucial role.' [12]

What ensued was an increasingly antagonistic political battle for the heart of the Swedish narrative. The cherished spirit of reason and consensus soon dissolved

into an atmosphere of conspiracy and suspicion. Proponents of wage-earner funds were at times accused of planning a *coup d'état*. Although the Social Democrats eventually relinquished the idea of a radical ownership transfer and considerably watered down their proposal, the wage-earner battle had made it apparent that the narrative of *folkhemmet* had reached a critical juncture, and that the Social Democratic hegemony in Swedish politics was coming to an end. The provisions of the welfare state were still largely considered sacrosanct; to openly advocate 'system change' was still a recipe for political defeat.

Nevertheless, a significant ideological shift was underway. Even prominent Social Democrats became wary of promoting and defending a system which they perceived as counterproductive to economic growth and thus to the financing of the welfare state. Instead they were increasingly tempted by the idea to have the market replace the state as the guarantor of efficiency and productivity in the welfare system. The bursting of the real estate bubble in the early 1990s, leading to a severe financial crisis and painful cuts in welfare programmes, further undermined public confidence in the Social Democratic ideal of 'the strong society' (meaning a strong state) as a means to redistributive justice and social progress.

7

System change

Thus it happened that in the 1990s Sweden embarked on one of the most far-reaching privatisation programmes in the Western world. Publicly financed schools, hospitals, health clinics and geriatric care were all offered to be run as business ventures by private investors. No distinction was made between for-profit and not-for-profit 'providers'. Furthermore, private providers of publicly financed services were free to start new schools and new health clinics at their discretion. Through free competition for customers (pupils) and clients (the sick and the elderly) efficiency would increase and costs would decrease and there would be better welfare for less money.

This has largely turned out be a political illusion. After it was discovered that investor-owned schools had manipulated grades (to attract new customers) and investor-owned homes for the elderly had understaffed their operations and mistreated their clients (to reduce costs and increase profits), there has a been a public outcry against the excesses of privatisation and the unrestricted pursuit of profits. Perhaps the most provocative consequence of the new Swedish system has been the large-scale entry of private equity firms into the welfare business. They now do not only own and run a growing share of the publicly financed school and welfare systems, but have also managed to squeeze large profits out of them. Even more provocative have been the advanced schemes employed to shelter these profits from taxation.

Although the privatisation system has generated powerful vested interests and will be hard to reverse or significantly change, it is by now clear that it in no way has it contributed to the preservation of the Swedish welfare model, but rather has hastened its demise. The radical nature of the Swedish privatisation scheme, going from one extreme to another, largely with Social Democratic acquiescence, might at first seem puzzling, but is perhaps a logical consequence of the Swedish penchant for technical (rational) solutions to political problems. For a while, the privatisation and marketisation of welfare services simply seemed to offer a more efficient and economic way of delivering and even improving the same public goods. It also served to mask the deeper causes of the malaise affecting the Swedish model, not least the impact of European integration and economic globalisation. The financing of a welfare state providing economic security and collective benefits to all, 'from cradle to grave', had been based on levels of economic growth and/or taxation that no longer seemed feasible. It had also been based on a degree of national sovereignty that no longer was at hand.

The Swedish model thus turned out to be exactly that, a profoundly Swedish project, hard to emulate and hard to sustain under rapidly changing international and national conditions. During the deep economic crisis in the early 1990s, when the Swedish economy shrunk, the budget deficit mushroomed and unemployment rose to previously unthinkable levels (8 per cent), an anti-immigration and anti-tax party, *Ny demokrati*, New Democracy, gained 25 seats in the *Riksdagen* and the mood of the country changed.

As a response to the crisis, Swedish governments (of all colours, *nota bene*) tacitly began to shrink the welfare system, making it renege on previous commitments and reduce rapidly swelling costs. This coincided

with a dramatic overhaul of the tax system (again by consensual decision) and a considerable lowering of tax levels, based on the ideological conjecture that 'dynamic effects' would ensue, increasing economic growth, generating new employment and enlarging the tax base instead of reducing it.

Nothing of the sort happened of course; the tax base was further reduced, and yet another nail was driven into the coffin of the Swedish model.

Perhaps the most radical departure from the far-reaching commitments of *folkhemmet* was the sweeping overhaul of the pension system in the late 1990s, again by political consensus. A system based on a state-guaranteed pension for all wage earners, predictably calculated on lifetime earnings, was changed into a system making pension payments contingent on national economic growth and demographic change. No matter how much you had paid into the system there was no longer a guarantee that you would get the money back. The immediate outcome was a lowering of pension levels and the introduction of hazard and insecurity into the system. In another radical departure from the principles of collective responsibility and solidarity, the new system mandated that part of the future pensions be individually invested in equity funds, in the sanguine promise that large financial returns would compensate for the weakening of public guarantees. Swedish pension levels were thus made contingent on the ups and downs of the global stock market. To this was added the risk of having already earned pensions reduced by a mechanism for 'balancing' pension levels. With no or little growth, Swedish retirees would see their actual pensions dwindle. This happened in 2010 and 2012 and will most likely happen again, with the result that Swedish retirees who thought they already had earned their pensions will discover they have not.

Since then, the breaking up of the Swedish model has continued apace, substituting collective obligations with individual responsibilities. A few examples:

- The fees of unemployment insurance (publicly subsidised, but administered by the unions) have been raised, while the ceiling for maximum compensation has been lowered, driving hundreds of thousands employees out of the public insurance system altogether, choosing to rely on opportunity, luck and relatives.
- The rules for paid sick-leave have been toughened considerably, introducing harsher public scrutiny of individual cases and a mandatory procedure for a return to the labour market after a fixed period.
- The large-scale introduction of private health insurance as a supplement to public insurance and provisions, is laying the ground for a dual health care system, with priority lanes to priority care for those who can pay for it.

The all-over effect of these retreats from the original principles of the Swedish model has been growing socio-economic inequalities. During the heydays of *folkhemmet*, Sweden probably had the highest social mobility in the world. It also had the smallest differences in wages and benefits (based on a centralised policy of wage solidarity), the most equalised housing standards (based on generous housing subsidies) and the most widespread access to higher education (based on far-reaching education subsidies). The sons and daughters of workers and farmers were given life opportunities that their parents would never have dreamt of. The advantages of inheritance and privilege were offset by decisive political measures to enhance the opportunities of education and social advancement for people of a disadvantaged background.

Considering the radical nature of the changes to the Swedish model and their far-reaching social consequences, there has so far been astonishingly little public discussion on the implications for the Swedish narrative and self-image. The official rhetoric of both the Social Democratic Party and the main liberal-conservative party, The Moderates, *Moderaterna*, has rather been about saving and preserving the Swedish model, albeit with renewed means, and not about exchanging it for a system based on lower taxes, less public security and more individual risk. The Moderates even underwent a remarkable ideological face-lift when they, after a shift in leadership, started to call themselves The New Moderates and rhetorically embraced welfare policies and principles that for years they had fought tooth and nail. Swiftly they presented themselves as the true custodian of the Swedish model, accusing the Social Democrats of having undermined its foundations: by weakening individual responsibility, by having work pay less than support, by allowing welfare abuse, by hampering efficiency and fairness. They even presented themselves as the New Workers' Party.

This turn-about was motivated less by a deeper change of mind (the grassroots of the party were in disbelief) than by the calculation that most Swedish voters were still attached to the basic principles of the Swedish model: high levels of social mobility, equalised life opportunities, a general safety net for all, the efficient production and fair distribution of common public goods. All this was based on the imperative of work, sustainable wages and high taxes, or what in Sweden has been called *arbetslinjen*, an axiomatic policy of actively promoting, preparing and facilitating employment.

None of this has obscured the fact that the model is inexorably unravelling, and that the narrative which for more than 80 years has been a constitutive element of

‘Swedishness’ is losing its foothold in collective experience.

What then remains is the ‘politics of nostalgia’; the yearning for a social model that is vanishing but still appeals to the minds and hearts of large segments of the Swedish population.

8

The politics of nostalgia

In the best-selling crime novels by the Swedish writer Henning Mankell, the hero is a seasoned, disillusioned and somewhat depressive police superintendent, Kurt Wallander. The crimes that Wallander is set to investigate are all heinous and macabre in character: heads are cut off and scalped, victims have sharpened wooden poles driven through their bodies, others are crucified, or dismembered, women and children are molested, burnt and tortured. These horrible events all take place against the backdrop of an idyllic Swedish landscape, inhabited by trusting and innocent people, unable to imagine such crimes, and even less to plan and execute them. In contrast, the perpetrators are all aligned with sinister and alien forces that invade the Swedish paradise and undermine it. The increasingly depressed Kurt Wallander is given many reasons and ample opportunities to mourn the good society which he once knew and which is now falling apart before his eyes. When the last skull has been splintered, and the last child has been molested or burnt, and the last foreign plot has been exposed, and Wallander warily has demolished the last lie, what has been conveyed is the image of Sweden losing its bearings and mores and becoming a society like all others. The personal depression of Kurt Wallander becomes inseparable from his mourning of the Swedish welfare utopia. There is no doubt in my mind that Henning Mankell, a self-confessed supporter of the radical left, is having his protagonist, Kurt Wallander, represent his own disillusionment with

the retreat from the ideals of *folkhemmet* and his own yearning for its political restoration.

The rhetoric of nostalgia remains in fact a potent factor in Swedish politics. This is most explicit in the party that still claims political ownership of the Swedish model, the Social Democrats. Although the party, while in government, has been instrumental to many of the changes signifying a retreat from the model, and while in opposition has largely acquiesced to liberal-conservative proposals to the same effect, it has skilfully managed to retain most of its traditional rhetoric, depicting itself as the true custodian of *folkhemmet*. According to this rhetoric, the radical reforms initiated and implemented have not been about dismantling the model, but about restoring and maintaining it under changing economic and social conditions. The political debate has largely been about who is preserving the model and who is dismantling it, largely concealing the fact that many of the crucial changes in the welfare system have been implemented in broad consensus.

9

The War of the Roses

This growing chasm between political rhetoric and actual policy has provoked a sometimes fierce ideological battle within the Social Democratic Party ('The War of the Roses') between 'right-wingers' and 'traditionalists'. The former have called for an overhaul of the welfare state, introducing market competition for 'clients' and 'customers', allowing for corporate providers with profit incentives. The 'renewers', as they call themselves, have also encouraged private health insurance as a supplement to the public health system. They argue that Sweden must use market forces to transform public welfare into a competitive and efficient 'industry' with global ambitions. Most importantly perhaps, the 'renewers' constitute the pro-European faction of the party. In 1995 they advocated EU membership, and in 2003 they campaigned for the euro. The 'renewers' overwhelmingly dominate the party leadership and are so far in control of the official Social Democratic agenda.

The 'traditionalists' are mainly to be found among the core activists of the party. They have largely opposed the agenda of the 'renewers', characterising it as a submission to neo-liberal ideologies and the abandonment of fundamental Social Democratic principles and goals. The 'traditionalists' want to restrict the impact of market forces on the welfare state, stop the privatisation of public goods, use state power to reverse the trend towards inequality and segregation, and defend the independence of the Swedish social model against global pressures and

directives from Brussels. Consequently the 'traditionalists' only reluctantly, and only after strong opposition, formally submitted to the official party line in the referendum on EU membership, and were actually allowed to openly confront the party line in the referendum on the euro. In both cases it became evident that the 'traditionalists' remained an influential force within the Social Democratic Party, and that the party in fact consisted of two factions, held together by a strong tradition of party discipline and the imperatives of political influence and power.

This unofficial and unresolved ideological conflict within the Social Democratic Party has, among other things, manifested itself in a persistent ambiguity towards the European project: yes to the perks of economic integration of membership, no to political integration and the impingements on national sovereignty. This deliberately inconsistent position has not only served to appease the strong anti-European sentiments of the 'traditionalists' within the party, but has also appealed to a broader segment of the population. Anti-Europeanism is a persistent and widespread undercurrent in small-town and rural Sweden, where the perks of EU membership and globalisation are not so obvious, and where the weakening of the welfare state is sometimes perceived as an existential threat (and perhaps rightly so).

This then, is the climate of political nostalgia, a widespread sentiment that Sweden can and must remain a nation apart, fully sovereign to retain, reshape and restore its welfare system at will. This is a climate in which Europe and the EU will always represent a threat rather than a promise, and in which the populist rhetoric of welfare nationalism (defending the welfare system from foreign intrusions of all kinds) might have a potential appeal on both the far right and the far left of the political spectrum. This climate is also sustained and nourished by the long Swedish tradition of

neutrality, having created a sense of national independence with little or no footing in a world of mounting global interdependence.

The fact that this apparent rift within Swedish society, between renewers and traditionalists, pro-Europeans and anti-Europeans, globalisers and welfare nationalists, has largely been contained within the Social Democratic Party also means that the rhetoric of nostalgia has so far been a part of mainstream politics. Two parties represented in the Swedish *Riksdagen*, the leftist *Vänsterpartiet* and the nationalist *Sverigedemokraterna* (Sweden Democrats), have platforms demanding that Sweden leave the EU. Both parties have promised, albeit from different positions and with different means, to restore *folkhemmet* to its former glory: the former by resisting the forces of globalisation, the latter by resisting immigration and multiculturalism. However, neither the Left Party nor the Sweden Democrats have yet been able to attract a larger political constituency: 5.6% and 5.7% respectively in the last elections (2010). As long as the promise of *folkhemmet* is seen as a legitimate and credible posture within mainstream politics, the politics of nostalgia will resist becoming the domain of political radicalism. As Sweden remains a reluctant nation, the Swedes still remain a reluctant people.

10

The radicals

Extreme right-wing or left-wing radicalism has so far had a negligible impact on Swedish politics. The Communist Party has only once gained more than 10 per cent of the voters (in 1944) and extreme nationalist parties and movements have remained outcasts in Swedish society. Whatever radical opinions Swedish voters might tacitly harbour, they have so far been effectively absorbed and domesticated by mainstream parties. The historical success of the Swedish model is still widely attributed to the virtues of ideological pragmatism, political consensus and social democracy.

When in 2010, the Sweden Democrats gained 20 seats in the Swedish *Riksdagen*, it signified the first breakthrough of a radical nationalist agenda in Swedish politics. The previous anti-immigration party, *Ny demokrati*, which was represented in the Swedish *Riksdagen* between 1991 and 1994, had a neo-liberal and anti-tax agenda, advocating a break with the Social Democratic welfare state.

The Sweden Democrats, however, is the first party in parliament to harness nationalism and xenophobia to the politics of nostalgia and the restoration of *folkhemmet*. Their propaganda constantly evokes the image of a lost paradise in which once 'a high level of economic and social security' was sustained and in which Swedish national culture was supreme. An election poster in the 2010 campaign depicts two blond children walking in a pastoral landscape with the text 'Give us Sweden back'.

In the Sweden of the Sweden Democrats there would again be solidarity, community and a high level of welfare for those belonging to the nation. Immigration and public support to immigrants must cease. Immigrants in Sweden must assimilate to the Swedish way and culture. Islam should be considered an alien and offensive religion.

In an effort to whitewash the extremist roots of the party, the criteria of common blood ties and genetic ancestry has been replaced by the criteria of cultural ancestry and belonging. The homogenous cultural identity of Swedes, *svenskheten*, is said to go back a thousand years in time. The party makes a distinction between inborn Swedes and assimilated Swedes. Only the former belong to the Swedish nation.

A significant number of people voting for the Swedish Democrats in 2010 had previously voted for the Social Democrats: mostly young unemployed men and union members, disgruntled with the weakening of public benefits and attracted by the unabashed pro-welfare propaganda of the Sweden Democrats. In the election campaign of 2010 the Sweden Democrats produced a suggestive TV commercial in which an anonymous mass of black-dressed women in burkas or niqabs, pushing a horde of baby-strollers, is seen overtaking an old Swedish retiree, laying claim to her welfare benefits. The message is clear, the People's Home can be restored by restricting its benefits to those truly belonging to the Swedish nation.

The Left Party, *Vänsterpartiet*, on the other hand, is programmatically immigrant-friendly, multiculturalist and internationalist. In its political practice, however, it is advocating policies that can reasonably be realised only through some form of welfare nationalism. Unlike most left-socialist parties on the Continent, the Swedish party is principally against EU membership, representing a paradoxical mix of nationalism in the European context and international solidarity in the global context.

The restoration of *folkhemmet* will be achieved by protecting the Swedish system from the alleged neo-liberal policies of Brussels, successively undermining the Swedish model. Although other left parties in Europe, in the wake of the euro crisis, have moved in the same nationalist and isolationist direction, the Swedish party has been consistent in its Europe-sceptic and welfare nationalistic stance. To finance the return to higher levels of general benefits and insurance and to protect wages and working conditions, it is proposing higher taxes on the rich, higher taxes on banks, higher taxes on profits, elimination of tax fraud, transfer of tax money from defence and profit-making to welfare. Some of these policies arguably presume certain restrictions on capital movements, a certain economic isolation from market pressures, and thus a certain amount of protectionism, although this is rarely explicitly stated.

The Left Party, *Vänsterpartiet*, is then clearly appealing for the votes of the traditionalists within the Social Democratic Party. In the run-up to the elections of 2012 the traditionalists successfully pressed the party leadership (against its will) to enter into a formal alliance with the Left Party (and the Green Party) aiming at forming a coalition government (for the first time in the history of the Social Democrats), scaring away middle-class voters and contributing to a historic defeat at the polls. However, as long as the traditionalists are seen as a legitimate and even genuine expression of Social Democratic values and policies, the reluctant radicals among the voters will most likely remain reluctant. The threshold to right-wing radicalism appears to be even higher since the narrative of anti-immigration and cultural intolerance is intuitively alien to the self-image of Sweden as a society based on universal and non-nationalist principles.

This is of course a political climate that might change, particularly if and when the narrative of the

Swedish model becomes incompatible with mainstream politics, and the politics of nostalgia becomes the domain of radicalism.

11

The extreme radicals

On 22 July 2011 the world was shocked by a combined bomb attack on government buildings in Oslo, Norway, leaving seven people dead, and the mass killing of 69 young people on the island of Utøya.

As soon as it became clear that the perpetrator was a thoroughbred Norwegian and not an Islamist terrorist there was a sense of unease. How could this possibly happen in a rich, peaceful and democratic welfare society? And how could any Norwegian wish to undo the very foundations of this society? Even more so when it became clear that his political universe was shared by many others and that his main source of inspiration was a Norwegian blogging under the name Nordman, *Nordic Man*.

The narrative of a Christian-Jewish (!) Europe, undermined by rampant 'multiculturalism' and threatened by a planned Islamic takeover, is being widely disseminated in books with titles like *Eurabia – the Euro-Arab Axis*, *The West's Last Chance*, *Menace in Europe*, propagated on a great number of websites (The Gates of Vienna, etc) and cherished by most right-wing extremists in Europe. Less conspiratory forms of Islamophobia have become the mainstay of growing populist and nationalist parties with parliamentary representation in most European countries, among them Sweden, Denmark, Finland and Norway. In most of these countries the political discourse has changed remarkably. The aggressive rhetoric of the Danish People's Party, *Dansk folkeparti*, against Muslims, immigrants and foreign

intrusions (EU) has successively, and mostly for opportunistic reasons, been assimilated by mainstream parties and permeated national media and considerably coarsened public language and debate. In Finland, the True Finns Party, *Sannfinländarna*, which gained 20 per cent in the parliamentary elections of 2011, becoming the third largest party, has clearly contributed to a more hesitant Finnish attitude towards further European integration and an open reluctance to underwrite further European bailout programmes for debt-ridden states with crumbling banks, demanding safer collaterals for payments and loans. The Finns are also showing a dwindling enthusiasm for supporting the euro at the cost of Finnish interests. This marks a considerable change of attitude, since Finland until recently was seen as one of the EU's staunchest proponents among member-states.

Sweden has so far remained an exception in this regard. Mainstream public discourse has largely been restrained and conciliatory in debating the issues of immigration and multiculturalism. Neither have forthright nationalist sentiments had a significant voice in defining Sweden's relationship with the EU. This does not imply that such sentiments do not exist, they clearly do, only that they have so far been subdued by a culture of reason and consensus. Danish critics have argued that the Swedes merely suppress their true opinions and feelings and that the Swedish debate is hypocritical, unrealistic and prone to wishful thinking. Against this it could be argued that 'true' opinions and feelings are conditioned by social and cultural traditions, and that Swedish traditions so far have produced a different political discourse based on a distinct national narrative. The alleged 'self-censorship' of Swedes might be understood in this perspective as the manifestation of a society historically averse to open conflicts and 'irrational' sentiments.

12

The reluctant radicals

'What would it take to make a Stockholm out of Moscow?', Swedish political scientist Bo Rothstein once asked.[13] Or more precisely, what would it take to transform Moscow from a society with little or no incentive to pay taxes (and little or no ability to collect them), to a society where taxes were duly paid and impartially collected and widely expected to benefit the public good rather than feed corruption and private pockets.

The question might also be posed in reverse: what would it take to make a Moscow out of Stockholm? Or more precisely, what would it take to unravel that particular political and social culture in which the Swedish model was once formed and sustained? Or in other words, what would it take to make radicals out of reluctants?

There is of course no way to know. The collective memory of a formidable success story will take time to eradicate. The rhetoric of nostalgia might for a long time still resonate with mainstream politics. The peculiar Swedish combination of strong collective institutions and extensive individual freedom will remain a hard act to follow. One might even say that Swedes are still ill prepared to live in a society in which the state abdicates from previous obligations and individuals are asked to take more responsibility for their own welfare. This will inevitably lead to the further waning of a social order that could once pride itself on having achieved the smallest socio-economic gaps in the Western world, the highest social mobility and the most level playing field in higher education.

Although most Swedes do not yet perceive a radical change in the social order, at most a transition from an outdated version of the Swedish model to a more updated one, there are nevertheless some potential developments that might make for a more radical turn in Swedish politics.

As in most European societies, employment is seen as a fundamental good, but perhaps more so in Sweden than anywhere else, since the promise of secure employment for all is at the core of the Swedish model. Full employment is the prerequisite for an extensive tax base and an extensive tax base is the *sine qua non* of an extensive welfare state. There is still in Sweden a broad political consensus on *arbetslinjen*, the imperative to take people off public support and into paid work. This explains the introduction, by the present liberal government coalition, of stricter rules for sick leave, reduced levels of unemployment insurance and higher pressure to seek employment. So far these new programmes have contributed little to the overall employment situation. Young people have largely been kept off the unemployment rolls by publicly financed programmes for training and short-term entry jobs. Similar programmes have been created for people who would otherwise be considered 'unemployable'. An increasing number of jobs are nevertheless short term, with less security and fewer prospects of social advancement. The number of people in various forms of higher education has increased but the link between education and reasonably secure and well-paid jobs has weakened.

Long-term youth unemployment is a disaster in any society, but perhaps more so in a society where the national identity and self-image is at stake. The long-term loss of economic and social security in significant segments of the Swedish population would be perceived as nothing less than the unravelling of the Swedish model.

The Swedish model has also been contingent on very high levels of public trust and very low levels of public corruption. Yearly surveys by the Swedish SOM Institute (University of Gothenburg) show that these levels are consistently moving in the 'wrong' direction. Not that Sweden in this regard differs much from other Western countries, but again, Sweden is a society that must deal with a potential threat not only to its social fabric but to its national self-image as well. The adaptation of Sweden to whatever new social model might emerge out of this transition will then demand no less than a redefinition of what Sweden 'is all about'.

The idea of a Swedish *sonderweg*, a separate destiny, was once – and not so long ago – a uniquely powerful and successful one, and it is hard to imagine how Sweden would fare without the institutional framework that still embodies that destiny. The art of creating and sustaining an extensive welfare society is certainly a most difficult and challenging one, particularly under circumstances when national cohesion is waning and national consensus is weakened. If at the end of the day, the Swedish model would be widely perceived as either failing or obsolete, and the gap between traditionalists and renewers would be harder to accommodate within mainstream politics, the politics of nostalgia might transform into an outright nationalist defence of the Swedish model, making radicals out of reluctants.

Notes

1 Gustav Möller, Minister of Social Affairs, in a speech to the second chamber of the *Riksdagen*, 25 May 1945

2 Editorial, *Dagens Nyheter*, 15 September 1945

3 *Expressen*, 25 June 1945

4 *Stockholm Läns- och Södertälje Tidning*, 25 November 1950

5 Cited from Alf W. Johansson (ed.), *Vad är Sverige? Röster om svensk identitet*, Stockholm: Prisma, 2001, p. 243

6 Cited from Johansson, pp. 303 ff

7 The Danish daily *Information*, 24 July 1958, cited from Johansson, *Vad är Sverige?* p. 386

8 Bengt Westerberg et al, *Dagens Nyheter*, 18 November 2011

9 Bengt Westerberg, from the website *Newsmill*, 19 April 2012

10 Antje Jackelén et al, *Dagens Nyheter*, 22 June 2012

11 Rudolf Meidner, in the official organ of the Swedish trade union organization, LO, *Fackföreningsrörelsen*, 1975, no. 19, p. 17

12 Rudolf Meidner, Anna Hedborg and Gunnar Fond, *Löntagarfonder*, Stockholm: Tiden, 1975

13 Bo Rothstein, *Sociala fällor och tillitens problem*, Stockholm: SNS, 2003, pp. 7 ff

In this revelatory piece – part of the 'Reluctant Radicals' series – Göran Rosenberg explores the hitherto limited success of populist movements in Sweden. This has been partly due to the historically remarkable success of the Swedish model and the concept of *folkhemmet*, the People's Home, defining a tight-knit national community striving for a class-transcending social order based on peace, justice, progress and democracy. For several decades the model offered generous access to welfare for all and far-reaching collective undertakings for wages, pensions and equality. In the early 1990s the Swedish paradise began to crumble. Collective obligations were weakened. New restrictions on pensions, health care, benefits, sick leave and unemployment insurance gave rise to increasing socio-economic inequalities. The rapid transformation from a culturally homogeneous nation to a society characterized by cultural and ethnic pluralism challenged the bonds of national cohesion.

Thus, while a particular Swedish way of life, deeply rooted in myths, narratives and memories, is vanishing into the past, the nostalgia for a 'paradise lost' remains a powerful theme in Swedish politics. As long as this promise of a return to a golden past is seen as a legitimate and credible posture within mainstream politics, the politics of nostalgia will resist becoming the domain of political radicalism. As Sweden still remains a reluctant nation, the Swedes still remain a reluctant people.

ISBN 978-0-9568225-7-4
counterpoint.uk.com