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Entretien : “Sweden: a model of leftwing nationalism?”

Lars Trägårdh*

The Swedes often refer to their country as “lagom”, a quite untranslatable word that signifies something that is just right, between too much and too little. A Swedish golden middle way, like the mixture between capitalism and planned economy after WWII, or referring to behaviors and manners, just “lagom”. The well-known historian, Professor Lars Trägårdh turned this cliché upside down. By publishing *Is the Swede Human?* (in 2006 with Henrik Berggren), he destroyed some of the tenacious belief among Swedes that they are living their life in a neutral normal space, far away from extremities. The book claims that the supposedly “socialist” Swedes are, in fact, individualists *in extremis* to an extent unimaginable even in the United States, they are devoted to the pursuit of personal autonomy.

Anyhow this is not the only way in which Sweden is seen as extreme from abroad. Nationalistic movements seem to strengthen their positions in the United States and all over Europe, often using Sweden as an example for the negative effects of large-scale immigration into a rich welfare state. Lately the US president Donald Trump brought up Sweden as an extreme country where immigration leads to a rise in criminality. His speech initiated a polarized debate in Sweden around who loves Sweden the most, those who criticize the country, which may lead to a more negative image of Sweden abroad, or those who have a more forgiving attitude to the current difficulties. Since November 2015, the immigration policy has become more strict and the indigenous debate has come to deal with to what extent the welfare state depend on the nation state and whether a generous state could exist without strict borders.

* Professor of history and civil society studies at Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm, Lars Trägårdh participates actively in the public Swedish debate with articles in newspapers and in interviews in radio and television. Until recently Trägårdh has been living abroad, in France, Kenya, Germany, and especially in the USA since the 1970s. After many years as entrepreneur and businessman, he returned to academic studies in 1986 and received his Ph.D. in history from UC Berkeley in 1993. During all these years as an expatriated Swede, he maintained his ties to his homeland and observed its developments through the decades.

Nordiques: Professor Lars Trägårdh, you are very active in the public debate in Sweden, discussing Swedish identity and nation-related issues. In your research, you show a special interest in the social contract between citizens and state and the high level of trust in the Swedish society. You are also focusing on nation building and nationalism. How would you describe the Swedish national story?

Lars Trägårdh: This is a good and important question, since actual expressions of nationalism in different countries very much depend on the dominant national narrative, the story about the nation that links a historical tale and a key set of values and identity markers. In this perspective it becomes interesting to look at the crucial decade of the 1930s, a time of economic depression and political crisis that was also, like our own present, a time of intense nationalism, often pitted against cosmopolitan ideals that we today refer to as globalism and human rights.

In many countries, including most prominently Germany and Italy but also with local expressions in for example France and many Eastern European countries, nationalism became associated with xenophobic and racist right-wing ideas. These ideas were connected to notions about “people” as “ethnos” and various imagined threats to the ethnic purity of the nation. In the case of Germany this idea of an ethnic or race-based *Volksgemeinschaft* (people’s community) was also linked to a tragic national narrative, which cast Germany as a victim of other nations’ aggressions and that imagined Western democracy as somehow foreign to the German “soul.”

In Sweden, by contrast, the national narrative essentially connected ideas concerning Swedish national identity to ideals that stressed democracy and freedom. The “Swedish way” was the path of popular democracy and individual freedom. These ideas were tied to the historical stress on the rule of law and the fact that the Swedish peasants never were thrown into a state of serfdom but retained their political and property rights. Not least the Swedish Social Democrats linked their political project to this narrative, promoting the idea of *folkhem* or people’s community as compatible with their own ideology, highlighting people as “demos” rather than “ethnos” and equating the people’s home with the primacy of citizenship and democracy. Turning away from Marxism that historically had been hostile to both nation and state, the Swedish Social Democrats also came to stress the legitimacy of the nation-state and national democracy. Over time, this Swedish version of a “national socialism” came to find expression in the modern welfare state.

Nordiques: What would you say is the connection between nationalism and the welfare-state?

Lars Trägårdh: The welfare-state is the institutional expression of the idea of the people's home. It is the embodiment of a social contract that joins individual citizens to each other and their common, shared institutions – ultimately what we call the State. The welfare-state is thus also a point of pride, the visible proof that the Swedes value equality, liberty, fraternity: social equality, individual freedom and national community. It is a social contract that is based on social trust among citizens, confidence in common institutions, and the autonomy of the individual. The social contract is in a certain respect very simple: citizens who work hard, pay taxes without cheating, and earn social rights without overusing them. It is a profoundly national project; one that joins ideas of reciprocity and work ethic among equals to solidarity with those who cannot yet or anymore work – like children, the sick and disabled, and the elderly.

Nordiques: You mention that the welfare state is a point of pride for Sweden as a state, but you rarely see Swedes openly show their pride of being Swedes. A typical example is the Swedish national celebration, the 6th of June, which is a very quiet celebration, not comparable to the Norwegian one, May the 17th, where people dress up in national costumes and everyone is waving the flag. A national celebration like the Norwegian seem to be unthinkable in Sweden. Is there a fear of being seen as an extremist for using national symbols in Sweden (waving the flag, singing traditional songs)? How nationalistic can one be in today's Sweden without getting outside the frame of social consensus, and be considered far-right?

Lars Trägårdh: Yes, there may be some such reluctance. Certainly Swedes are not as free to wave the flag as are, for example, the Norwegians and the Danes. But less obvious signs of nationhood are ok, even expected. For example, one is expected to celebrate midsummer and to organize crayfish parties. But ostentatious gestures that suggest a chauvinistic form of nationalism are frowned upon, and today many are nervous also about being thought of as supporters of a xenophobic party, the Sweden Democrats.

Nordiques: You mention the Sweden Democrats, but most Swedes would probably refer to themselves as not being very nationalistic. Would you say that they are right assuming that?

Lars Trägårdh: In a way that is true, but only because Swedes are in a position of taking the nation state as a given. They have never been conquered, nor have they had a revolution or a struggle for national liberation. But at a more subtle level, Swedes are quite often deeply nationalistic nonetheless, often expressing

a somewhat smug sense of being superior in many ways, projecting the idea of being a model – even super-model – for the rest of the world. To be sure, this is not a nationalism that is aggressive or militaristic; rather Sweden projects the aura of being a “moral” super-power, particularly devoted to ideals such as human rights, development aid, gender equality, children rights. Most recently, the current government has, for example, suggested that Sweden adheres to a “feminist” foreign policy that attempts to project Swedish gender equality and children’s rights values into the world at large.

Nordiques: If Swedes are nationalistic without realizing it, what would you say that Swedish nationalism consists of?

Lars Trägårdh: I think it is this sense of claiming to have had most fully realized certain modern, rational and ostensibly universal ideals that put Sweden and the other Nordic countries at the top of so many rankings that measure democracy, trust, lack of corruption, gender equality, children’s rights, happiness, ecological values, tolerance, openness to immigration, etc. What is interesting about this type of nationalism or tendency towards self-aggrandizement is that these values or characteristics are not thought of as peculiarly Swedish but rather as universal values that simply have been earlier and most fully realized in Sweden. The idea is that, eventually, the rest of the world will become more like Sweden once they see the light and emerge out the darkness of their own backward cultural misery.

Nordiques: One could then conclude that the Swedish nationalism is very internationalist. Wouldn’t it be possible to imagine a world without nationalism? Do we actually need nationalism?

Lars Trägårdh: The short answer is yes. I say this being fully aware of the fact that certain forms of nationalism have brought incredible misery to the world, including the Second World War and the Holocaust. But ultimately, the nation state is also, not everywhere but in countries like Sweden and other modern democracies, a project of freedom, founded on the principles of the French and American revolutions. These projects of freedom and democracy have liberated millions from feudal and pre-democratic social, political and economic structures; allowed for the emergence of a modern individual and of the emancipation of women. Without the nation state, there would be no modern democracy, nor the basis for a politics of solidarity in the form of the welfare-state.

Of course, we could “imagine” just like John Lennon did, a world without borders, a cosmopolitan utopia populated by a humanity united in love and brotherhood and sisterhood. But we are very far from that utopia. A more realistic vision is that of a world of nations that learn to establish common rules for cooperation and orderly competition and conflict resolution. And this has been the common

norm, from the United Nations to the European Union and the United States. But there are reasons to think that the nation state might well be the largest form of political community, which allows both for a sense of community and society, on the one hand, and for the maximum amount of individual freedom, on the other. A "gated community" in a certain respect, but far less limited than other forms of gated communities, be they tribes, clans, sects, families or, at the other extreme, for-profit enclaves for the rich and privileged in a global market society devoid of any true drive to lessen inequality and enable equal opportunity.

Nordiques: You spent some of your youth in France and you are a regular guest here. Do you see any similarities in the national story-telling in France and Sweden and the nationalism that is expressed in both countries?

Lars Trägårdh: Certainly there are many similarities: the centrality of the idea of the citizens; the strong role of the state; democracy; a certain overblown sense of national self-importance. Both countries imagine themselves being models for the world, as giving particularly perfect expression to certain universal ideals and principles. But there are also strong differences. In France the family is more important, whereas Sweden has a far more individualistic social contract. That also means that gender equality and children's rights play a much smaller role in French national story-telling. Conversely, Sweden has, certainly since the arrival of a Frenchman as the founder of the current royal dynasty – the Bernadottes – given up their great power status and dreams of playing a role on the military world stage. While Sweden is focused on being the number one welfare state at home and a moral super power in the world, France still harbors dreams and nostalgia linked to its not so distant days as a great power, even as it slowly slides into the rungs of the struggling medium-size powers, barely able to project its formerly formidable sense of power onto the world stage.

Nordiques: Would you say that the French are more nationalistic than the Swedes in general?

Lars Trägårdh: Yes and no. Perhaps France is more obviously and ostentatiously nationalistic, but underneath the surface the Swedes may well be more sure of their superiority than the French, who suffer from decline, loss of empire and stature. There is also no equivalent in Sweden of July the 14th, nor of the rich cultural and culinary traditions, from literature to wine, that make France such a popular destination for tourists across the world.

Nordiques: Both Sweden and France seem to face a time of transition, a changing society. Do you see signs of more nationalism in our countries and the rest of Europe and what shape will nationalism take in the future?

Lars Trägårdh: To be sure. In France Marine Le Pen and the Front National attract a lot of support; the same is true in Sweden with Jimmie Åkesson and the Sweden Democrats. Beyond that, many of the other political parties now try to adjust to politics after Brexit and Trump, re-evaluating the globalist ambition of the post-national elites and returning to a politics more focused on the citizens and the primacy of the nation-state. This may well be a much needed correction to past excesses – but only if the parties at the political center can strike a balance between a politics of citizenship and collaboration beyond the national borders. The key challenge is the mismatch between a globalizing economy and the national democracies. While we increasingly live in a global market society, all politics remain if not local, then at least national. What we can hope for is a nationalism that is also internationalist; that envisions the world as a federation of semi-autonomous nation-states locked together through trade, cooperation and civilized competition.

**Propos recueillis
par Kristoffer Lieng**