



## Nordic Nostalgia and Nordic Light: the Swedish model as Utopia 1930–2007

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# Jenny Andersson

## NORDIC NOSTALGIA AND NORDIC LIGHT

### The Swedish model as Utopia 1930–2007

*In the last decade, Sweden has emerged on the other side of the 1990s crisis with, if not its self-image intact, then at least a reasserted confidence as, once again, the most modern country in the world. Crisis management in the 1990s seemed to have succeeded. The Swedish bumblebee – the unthinkable animal that flies despite its high taxes and large public sector – flew again. The ‘Swedish model’ was back after a decade as the punch bag of neoliberalism. Throughout the European centre left – from the debate on the European social model to Ségolène Royal and Gordon Brown – Sweden has reemerged as ‘Nordic light’, proof that a better world is possible. This reappraisal in the eyes of the world has paradoxical consequences in Sweden, since it seems to overwrite the uncertainty and insecurity of crisis with assertion and confidence, while leaving many questions unanswered. It also leads to new definitions of what Sweden is. The paper suggests that Sweden post-1990s suffers from a particular kind of nostalgia, in which the famous Model emerges as a kind of paradise lost with uncertain links both to past and future. While Sweden yet again becomes the utopia of others, it is a kind of future past to itself.*

**Keywords** People’s home, nostalgia, Swedish model, 1990s

#### **Introduction: The most modern country in the world**

In 2007, a Swedish TV show was entitled *Världens modernaste land*, the most modern country in the world.<sup>1</sup> The show consisted of bringing together diverse academics, historians and pundits and have them explain what makes Sweden so special. The answers given reflected key images of Swedish modernity: the Myrdal couple, the rise of family policy and daycare, equality and industry. While the programme was set in a humorous tone and written by the comedian Fredrik Lindström, there was nothing satirical about it: Sweden was the most modern country in the world.

The fact that a television chat show could be devoted to such a theme and conducted in such a way, with ‘experts’ jokingly describing to the public why Sweden really is different and more sophisticated than other countries in the world around us, is an illustration of the way that notions of the Swedish model and notions of the People’s home have seen a remarkable resurgence in Swedish political discourse in the decade from the mid 1990s. The early 1990s were, as we know, characterized by

depression and crisis, and in the wake of crisis followed a political debate that questioned the ideological foundations of the Swedish model. Partly this was explicitly political, to do with the struggle between social democracy and the Swedish political right in ascendance since the 1980s. But it involved larger layers of Swedish society, including the historical community. In the early 1990s, Sweden got its particular version of a *historikerstreit*, concentrated on the issue of the moral and normative foundations of the People's home. On one side were historians who, from a Foucauldian perspective, argued that there was a dark side to the People's home in the form of utopian legacies of social engineering. On the other, political scientists argued that the Swedish welfare state was built on values of universalism and individual rights.<sup>2</sup> For a while no Swedish historian or political scientist could write anything without referring to this debate, despite the fact that it was clearly influenced by strong political currents in the contemporary, and naïve both in its stereotypical representation of highly complex matters and in the weight that it ascribed to the scope of individual historical actors. The would-be social engineer Gunnar Myrdal became the bad guy, and the Minister of social affairs, Gustav Möller, the good guy. This dichotomy between the dark and the bright side of the People's home would influence Swedish history writing greatly in coming years, and it remains a divide, even if a new generation of Swedish historians have in recent years tried to describe the People's home as 'grey'; as drawing on complex legacies of both discipline and emancipation, both social engineering and social citizenship. Sterilization policies, immigration and fear of the Other are all issues that have fundamentally tainted the discussion of the past and future of the Swedish welfare state.<sup>3</sup>

It seems clear, in retrospect, that the vitality and sometimes even brutality in this debate in the early 1990s is due to the standing of the trope of the People's home and the welfare state in Swedish political consciousness, as well as to fundamental tensions in Swedish historiography. While Swedish political history is characterized by a relative harmony – the absence of civil war, military conflict, larger political polarization or even (despite the fact that Sweden has both an imperial history and an indigenous population in the North) conflict over historical memory to do with power and subject identity – it is also fundamentally focused on the welfare state, and on the People's home as the key historical experience that holds the nation together. Swedish history writing has been highly focused on the history of the welfare state, as a history of consensus, compromise and national unity. This reflects the way that Swedish historiography has remained highly entangled with the nation state, even after the demise of conservative history writing in the late 19th and early 20th century. The questioning of the role of historians in the construction of the national narrative that has taken place elsewhere has not gained the same prominence in Sweden (until recently).<sup>4</sup> Swedish historiography in the post-war period is dominated by a kind of *sonderweg* argument, in which the welfare state and the Swedish model are seen as the logical outcomes of particularly Swedish institutions and values. So roots of the welfare state have been seen in the conservative traditions of paternalism around the *bruk*, the iron and paper mills of the industrial revolution,<sup>5</sup> or in the legacies of a strong peasant culture that never succumbed to feudalism.

Similarly, the history of the Swedish model has been interpreted as overall a peaceful trajectory (despite the many political conflicts that underpin its 20th-century history) drawing on a deep consensus culture of compromise between labour and

capital, employers and employees, women and men. The strikes, conflicts and even violent events in Swedish political history, such as the hunger riots in urban areas in the 1920s, the clashes between military and striking workers in Ådalen in the 1930s or the wild cat strikes of the 1970s (miners) and 1990s (nurses, teachers), have thus become disregarded as exceptions and anomalies in a consensus-driven political culture.<sup>6</sup>

The results of this historiographical canon is that the development of the welfare state and the notion of the People's home tend to be understood as a more or less teleological trajectory; as something deeply inscribed in Swedish political culture, and as something stemming from a particular kind of rationality deeply associated with the values of reformism. As the conceptual historian Kasimierz Musiał has shown, the very notion of the Nordic model has strong connotations to the idea of a quintessentially progressive middle way between socialism and capitalism, a rationalist culture of social reform and democratic institutions rooted in the strong social movements of the past. This notion of Scandinavian progressiveness is informed by an idea of a certain moral quality, a uniqueness of being, the idea that

in Scandinavia there exists a certain frame of mind, a mental capacity by virtue of which a change for the better comes to be regarded as inevitable. Consequently the Scandinavian way of being progressive was perceived as a moral quality, which pushed individuals to act in an innovative manner, to try to act out new solutions and to achieve the unachievable.<sup>7</sup>

This idea of virtually embodying modernity is part of the mythology around the Nordic countries since Marquis Childs' famous observation of Sweden as a middle way between capitalism and socialism in the 1930s, but it is also a pervasive self-image of Swedish society, a self-image that faltered momentarily in the crisis moment of the early 1990s but that has made a remarkable comeback in the 2000s.<sup>8</sup> In the summer of 2006, in the midst of an election campaign that would eventually see social democracy defeated by a new and rejuvenated Swedish Right, a book was published by the Swedish historians Lars Trägårdh and Henrik Berggren called *Är svensken människa*, literally meaning 'is the Swede a person or human being'. The book played on central notion of Swedish civilization and Swedish character.

In Trägårdhs' and Berggrens' account, Swedish contemporary history was explained as a unique kind of social contract which draws on notions not only of national unity but of what it is to be Swedish, on, in effect, a 'common historical definition of Swedishness', deeply rooted in Swedish history and closely associated with the notion of the People's home,

This social contract was not forced upon the Swedish people by the social engineers of the 1930s. It relies in fact on a common and historically anchored definition of Sweden and Swedishness that can be traced back to the 18th century.<sup>9</sup>

This was a curious argument in the midst of an electoral campaign where all parties fought over the ownership of the notion of the People's home. According to Berggren and Trägårdh, the People's home was thus not an ideologically polarized future vision, but in fact part of the Swedish historical experience and rooted in Swedish identity. It is hard not to think that the success of the book lay exactly in this, in the way that it established the People's home not as a concept belonging to a certain political project,

but to a national culture.<sup>10</sup> In this sense, the book was a kind of rehabilitation of the People's home metaphor, which since the historiographical debate in the early 1990s is still tainted with legacies of social engineering, and it was also a kind of rehabilitation of the notion of *Swedishness*, which in 2005 and 2006 became an essentially contested concept with, on the one hand, the rise of a Swedish postcolonial debate, and, on the other, increasing success of the Swedish nationalist far right. In this way, Berggren and Trägårdh's book reflected notions of an essentialized modernity, where to be modern is to be Swedish, and vice versa.

### Conjectures of the middle way

Berggren and Trägårdh's book is a contemporary illustration of the stereotypical images of Nordic modernity that have tainted political discourse in the 20th century, and a good example of the centrality of the notion of the People's home in Swedish political culture. Images of Nordic modernity are integral to the Swedish self-image but also constant projections of political discourse in Sweden, constantly defining new itineraries of Swedish modernity. While the concept of the People's home, quite like notions such as the Swedish or Nordic model, has different conjectures and trajectories throughout the 20th century (to which we will return below) it is fair to say that the metaphor of the People's home has become a trope in Swedish political consciousness. The importance of this trope, I argue, must be seen in the way that the notion of the People's home seems to occupy a central space in notions of Swedish identity and, in fact, is constantly represented as the fundamental common historical experience and imagined community, a central element in what brings modern Swedes together as a society, quite like British discourse keeps falling back on memories of Empire and French on the values of the République.<sup>11</sup> In this respect, as will also be discussed below, it seems to have gained a stronger position than ever in the late 1990s and 2000s, in the wake of depression and social crisis, and in reaction, I suggest, to challenges such as structural economic change, globalization, European integration and, not least, multiculturalism, which have all triggered complex reactions in national cultures, in Sweden and elsewhere.

Kasimierz Musiał points out the deeply reflective function of notions of Nordic modernity or indeed the Swedish model: the way that these concepts have been forged in a kind of mirror plays between foreign observations of Swedish society and Swedish self-assertions in a thoroughly interdependent process. In this sense there are also conjectures in the notion of the Swedish model or middle way as sometimes deep in crisis, and sometimes reasserted as role models or future visions for the coming era. In this sense, debates on Sweden also seem to follow the conjectures of central debates of European modernity, where somehow it has time and time again manage to represent itself as the golden middle way between extreme or exhausted solutions.

It is clear that this idea of the middle way, as the kind of rational compromise between the best of two worlds, built on pragmatism, piecemeal reformism and a feeling for the common good in the welfare of the people, became a core element in the self-image of Swedish politics throughout the 20th century. As such it has also been strengthened by the affirmations and confirmations that throughout the post-war period have come from foreign observers, who have seen in Sweden something deeply desirable that unfortunately for various reasons was not within the realm of the possible in their own political context. In this manner, one could say that Sweden has functioned

as a kind of utopia in European politics in the 20th century – the utopia of the rational, pragmatic society where social problems are approached in a non-dogmatic and efficient way, and where the great conflicts of capitalism – combining efficiency and equality, markets and society – somehow found their utopian solution. In this sense Sweden occupies a very particular space in the European consciousness and in the debates of European politics in the 20th century, deeply to do with images of European modernity and European notions of welfare capitalism, and we can trace its history through the shifting notions of capitalism over the 19th and 20th century.

To early observers, like Childs, for whom the idea of the middle way model was an argument in the American emerging debate on the New Deal, Sweden was an example of the possible combination of the virtues of the market economy with the utopian objective of socialism – the distribution of profit for the common good. This was the essence of the middle way, a kind of quintessential Third Way between the two apparent established alternatives in world politics of the time, communism and capitalism. Childs' observation of Sweden stands in a curious exchange relationship with Swedish political culture: the Myrdal couple, to whom so much of the 1930s policies have been ascribed, travelled to America to study what they thought was the future: the New Deal, which they described in the 1941 book *Kontakt med Amerika*. To the Myrdals then, America was the continent of the future, land of the brave where the political will to implement radical and bold solutions to social issues existed at a time when they clearly thought it did not in Sweden. To the Myrdal's at this point, Sweden was an old and laggard country, backwards in family structures and economic affairs, and in a general kind of political rut following stalemates of Swedish liberalism and entrenched positions of social democracy.

Childs' interpretation of Sweden as the middle way between communism and capitalism is perhaps one of the more common connotations of the idea of the Swedish model. But there have been other ones, similarly associated with historical debates on the organization of economy and society. In the post-war period, the British socialist Anthony Crosland, in *The Future of Socialism*, found proof that equality and social progress could be achieved without suffocating the liberty of the middle classes. This was a very British argument that fed straight into a British debate about the role of socialism in affluent societies in the 1950s.<sup>12</sup> To Crosland, then, the utopia of socialism was circumscribed, in the UK, by the dominance of the middle classes and their rejection of socialism, while the Swedish experience testified to the fact that equality could be reached without infringing on the liberty of market capitalism, entrepreneurship and individual advancement. Crosland's appraisal stands in contrast, of course, to other strands on the European Left, to which Sweden has been seen not as the perfect socialist society but as the place of compromise and corruption. Crosland's utopian picture of Sweden has been reiterated in the British Left throughout the 20th century. In the last years – in connection with a British debate on the limits of its own Third Way (in the sense of Blairism) – Sweden has thus emerged as a renewed left-wing utopia, with publications such as the former *Financial Times* journalist Robert Taylor's pamphlet *Sweden - Proof That a Better World is Possible* and the recent rather eccentric memoir of the conservative journalist Andrew Brown, *Fishing in Utopia*, in which he describes his infatuation with this exotic social democratic role model society, and then deplores the fact that this society no longer exists, indeed, grieves a disappeared future.<sup>13</sup>

While Sweden has thus been a constant point of reference to the European and particularly Anglo-Saxon Left, Sweden, to a European and American liberal Right, has been a dystopian vision, a cradle-to-grave society in which individual freedom was strangled to the price of the highest suicide levels of the world.<sup>14</sup> Among the better examples of this interpretation is Roland Huntford's book *The New Totalitarians* (1972) which saw in Sweden a quasi totalitarian society. Huntford's book made claim to history – seeing a particularly Scandinavian form of political control emerging from the 16th century king of national unification Gustav Vasa and on.<sup>15</sup> Another form of these right-wing arguments, on a more academic and serious level but still dystopian in tone, emerged in the early 1990s as observations of Sweden's economic recession. The American economic historian Peter Lindert has described how, in the pages of the *Financial Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, the same model that throughout important parts of the post-war period was praised as a European role model was now dismissed, often with an undertone of glee, as bankrupt and hopelessly naive in its belief that an economic model with 50% public expenditure and tax pressure could survive the winds of globalization.<sup>16</sup> There is an underlying figure of thought in this that essentially there must be something wrong with such a model society, a figure of thought which reappears from time to time particularly in the Anglo-Saxon conservative media. It happened after the murder of Olof Palme in 1986, in the early 1990s in relation to economic crisis and again after the murder of Anna Lindh in 2003. In the aftermath of the boxing day Tsunami in 2004, where some 500 Swedes died, the British *Telegraph* wrote of a little blond orphan girl who survived the waves, but was now doomed to a life in the care of the 'Nanny State', an argument that seemed tainted by the same paper's critique of Gordon Brown's plans to expand childcare and family provisions in the UK as *doing a Sweden*. In the same way, the recent US presidential campaign saw the republican candidate John McCain accusing Barak Obama of secretly desiring to turn the US into Sweden.<sup>17</sup>

I have given but some examples of the changing historical conjecture of notions of the Swedish model in the above, the point being that these foreign observations serve not only as assertions of images of grandeur and pride (or stalemate and decline) in Swedish society, but that they also have a direct influence on the future trajectories of Swedish society in the sense that the meaning of the notion 'Swedish model' constantly changes with the changing content of these foreign observations. The shifting conjectures in the international political climate reflect, here, in shifting conjectures in domestic notions of the Swedish model and domestic definitions of what the middle way is, what sets it apart from other systems in space and time and essentially also where it is going. In the words of the liberal philosopher Charles Taylor, modernity is ultimately a kind of self-understanding, inseparable from a set of images and symbols for how we fit together, how we got to where we are, and how we relate to other versions of modernity.<sup>18</sup> Images of the efficient society, the organization of capitalism, and the social contract or 'social model' are important elements of such images of modernity.<sup>19</sup>

Through these changing definitions of what Sweden is and where, so to speak, the middle way lies; the very understanding of Nordic modernity constantly reconfigures.

Arguably, one of the central functions of the term middle way or Nordic model in the post-war period has been drawing a line of demarcation between East and West, since the position of the Scandinavian countries in Eastern or Western Europe is by no

means a historical given but rather, the result of cultural negotiations of the meaning of *Norden* as a frontier.<sup>20</sup> This geo-spatial dimension is of course closely connected to images of communism and capitalism as the two doctrines of efficiency dominating the European 20th century and as such it is by no means obsolete. In the preamble to enlargement and the entry into the European union of the countries of the former East bloc, there was a new illustration to the relevance of this 'frontier' notion, as the Swedish leadership first promised solidarity with the East, notably Poland, and to open its borders, and then quickly resorted to a highly welfare nationalist and protectionist argument to do with fears of welfare tourism and social dumping. Swedish trade unions have displayed a similar protectionist and nationalist stance in the highly complex Vaxholm case.<sup>21</sup> In both cases this was in 'defence' of the Model as incompatible with other social models in Europe and with the mentality and work ethic of other European countries.<sup>22</sup>

The middle way, as a term closely related to understandings of a *Third way*, a term that exists in a variety of meanings in European political history, from socialism to fascism or modern eco-politics, is a term with certain characteristics. A third, or middle, way, is per definition a compromise solution, thus drawing on elements from other political projects, but redirecting these in terms of some kind of synthesis and way forward. As Bastow and Martin point out, the notion of Third Way or middle way is a powerful rhetorical device which projects a path between exhausted political alternatives; out of a crisis ridden past, and into a brighter future.<sup>23</sup> As such, it dismisses what is behind as unmodern, obsolete and irrelevant in the modern era, and what lies in front as something that requires fundamental change. This, indeed, was the central strategy of the political project known as the Third Way in the 1990s, where a new European future in the form of the knowledge economy, welfare state modernization and industrial restructuring was articulated as a question of radical break and discontinuity with the European past. In contrast, in Sweden the middle way tends to stand for continuity, as a kind of constant re-enactment of the traditions of Swedish modernity. These arguments of continuity, however, often cover questions of more or less radical change.

We can see these changes in the changing meanings of the notion of the Swedish model in post-war European political discourses. Childs' 1930s observation was an argument to do with the rise of organized modernity, as a long term institutional response to the Social question. It was clearly structured by the then increasingly discernible division of the industrialized world between two different socioeconomic systems and between East and West. This particular meaning of the Swedish model as the best of communism and the best of capitalism is today forgotten, but so are, in fact, Crosland's 1950s observations. In the 1950s, and throughout much of the post-war period, understandings of the Swedish model had to do with the rise of the world's largest, non-socialist, public sector, universal welfare state distribution and the Rehn-Meidner model in labour market policy, which secured full employment with high levels of rationalization and productivity output.<sup>24</sup> Following the 1990s, however, the meaning of the notion of the Swedish model has changed, in relationship to the changing focus of contemporary politics and indeed, to changing notions of capitalism. When European observers talk of the Swedish model in the 1990s, they tend to mean a successful model of retrenchment, that is, an example of a welfare state which has successfully adapted to the pressures of globalization by a far going restructuring of the



public sector, a fundamental and peaceful reform of the pension system (which indeed seems utopian in many European countries where suggestion of such reform triggers massive social protest) and an historic supply-side orientation in the labour market – that is, high levels of flexibility and emphasis on labour skill rather than on market regulation. In many ways this is a meaning that is diametrically different to Childs' – since it stresses the contributions of the welfare state to market profit rather than vice versa. It is perhaps not too bold to suggest that it is precisely because of these shifting meanings, towards a much more market centred understanding of the Swedish model, that the concept is today so universally acclaimed within the political spectrum in both Europe and Sweden. Today the European Right embraces the concept. Recently, the subject of the Swedish model was the topic of a seminar co-organised by the Swedish prime minister and leader of the Swedish Right Fredrik Reinfeldt and the British Conservative Party leader David Cameron.<sup>25</sup> It also illustrates the way that Sweden as utopia is historically to do with notions of the pragmatic and efficient capitalist society – not with notions of the radical alternative – and that it therefore lends itself to interpretation from different political standpoints.

### The remarkable return of the bumblebee

Thus, notions of Sweden have changed fundamentally with the dramatically changing notions of capitalism in recent decades and with the changing European political landscape. These changes can be discerned not only in the shifting meanings of the notion of Swedish model but also in the conjectures of the related notion of People's home.<sup>26</sup>

In the 1990s, no one believed in the validity of the Swedish model, not even the Swedes themselves. In many ways this can be seen as the culmination of events from the late 1960s on. The late 1960s saw, in Sweden as elsewhere, the rise of a political critique of the welfare state from the left. In Sweden, it focused on social democracy and the political project of the People's home, as not radical enough, as a bureaucratised model of social engineering and as a version of a the authoritarian society. A decade later, a similar critique came from the Swedish Right, as part of a growing international neoliberal critique of the welfare state.<sup>27</sup> This led to the rapid demise of the notion of People's home in political discourse. Swedish social democracy started to shun the notion of the People's home beginning in the early 1980s.<sup>28</sup>

Instead, as the Swedish historian Bo Stråth has shown, the concept of Swedish model became prominent, as the description of a social model the particularity of which was until then not clear. The importance of the concept as self-image, Stråth argues, seemed to take off at the very moment that the idea of the Swedish way as a particular kind of modernity came under threat, with faltering growth rates from the late 1960s, increased political polarization and eventually the breakdown of corporate arrangements in 1982. In the following years, also the notion of Swedish model, quite like the notion of People's home, became the symbol of a corrupt power regime, exaggerated corporatism and stifled individual freedom. In 1990, the Swedish social model and the underpinning values of the People's home and the Swedish model were put into question in the *Maktutredningen* and by its both domestic and international experts.<sup>29</sup>

So the People's home became the home of an oppressive state and its social engineering, its empowered trade unions and disempowered individuals. In the

aftermath of the early 1990s debate on the ideological foundations of the welfare state, both notions of the People's home and the Swedish model became hopelessly obsolete. The arrival of economic crisis can perhaps be seen as the catalyst of these discourses, as crisis led to interpretations of systemic failure. One of the Swedish tabloids published an epitaph over the Swedish model; dismissed as dead, soon to be buried.

One of the more interesting descriptions of this turnaround in Swedish self-images in the 1990s – from model society to bankrupt model – was the former Prime minister Göran Persson's deeply personal description of the humiliation in his trips to Washington in the early 1990s to plead for the credit worthiness of the Kingdom of Sweden with the creditors of the World Bank and the IMF.<sup>30</sup> Persson's conclusions of this, which set the direction of economic policy in the 1990s and 2000s, was that no welfare society could get away with overspending, and that overspending, in fact, was a kind of moral sin, at odds with the values of Lutheranism and the hard-working peasant traditions of the Swedish model. Thus, in Persson's account, the 1990s crisis became interpreted as resulting from a perversion of the principles of Swedishness and Swedish modernity, and his defences of austerity policies in the 1990s also became increasingly nationalistic in character – calling to senses of national solidarity, of carrying the burdens solidaristically and depicting the opposition as betraying the fatherland in challenging principles of the so-called crisis package. Taking the country out of crisis was a matter of national rebuilding, to be undertaken on principles not only of solidarity, but of patriotism.<sup>31</sup> In the *budgetsaneringen*, the following years of, as it were, 'sanitizing' Swedish finances, such patriotic and covertly nationalistic arguments became increasingly present as purging the deficit became linked, somehow, to purging the Swedish mentality and returning to a core of Lutheran work ethics and disciplined spending. Saving the economy became a question about saving Sweden as a particular form of modernity and a particular mentality.<sup>32</sup>

Persson's sense of humiliation at the lost future of the Swedish model did not however last very long. By 1998 the budget deficit was tamed and unemployment under control. The country was saved. A few years later Prime Minister Persson spoke of the Swedish model as a bumblebee, defying the law of gravity on its impossible flight among daisies and forget-me-nots.<sup>33</sup>

Like the bumblebee, the Swedish model flew. In recent years there has been a remarkable comeback in the idea of the Swedish model, if in competition with other models of Finnish schooling and Danish flexibility. This reappraisal of Sweden has complex origins but must be seen as the effect of a growing shift in European politics from neoliberalism to a renewed interest in social organization and social model. Today, the welfare state is no longer seen, with the exception of the most conservative economists, as inefficient but rather as the prerequisite of an efficient capitalist society. In this European search for new social solutions and indeed for a social model, Sweden has again emerged as something of a utopia in European politics, at the top of welfare leagues and benchmarking.<sup>34</sup>

This has also led to the reappraisal of Sweden from various parts of the European political spectrum. For instance, for the so-called Brownite faction of British Labour, Sweden is 'Nordic light', a country of perpetual modernization, constantly making the best of technological and economic change.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, in 2006 the Labour party spoke in terms of 'Can we do a Sweden?' Just as Crosland's Swedish utopia in the 1950s was circumscribed as what he saw as a fundamental feature of British society – the

dominance of the middle classes – also this contemporary argument identifies a utopia that seems particularly constructed for a British audience. So what keeps British policy-makers from doing a Sweden lies in notions of *Britishness*, in fundamental obstacles in British culture and political mentality against the kind of progressiveness that characterises *Swedishness*. The British believe not in solidarity but in values of fair play, rights against responsibilities and liberty, and these values deeply entrenched in the liberal electorate is essentially what, at the same time needs to be overcome but also fundamentally opposes the realization of a Sweden in Britain.<sup>36</sup>

Similarly, in the French electoral campaign in 2006 and 2007, Sweden emerged as the utopia of gender equality, ‘modern’ in the sense of light years ahead of a French paternalist culture, allowing people, and particularly women, to reconcile working life and family. To the socialist candidate Ségolène Royal, Sweden thus lent credibility to a utopia of modern and reinvented politics, which also served to profile her as the radical candidate of newness, in bright contrast to the ‘elephants’ of the socialist party leadership and the macho profile of her opposing candidate Nicholas Sarkozy.<sup>37</sup>

So Sweden is yet again the most modern country in the world.

### Politics of nostalgia – Sweden post-1990s

However, this reinvented European appraisal has curious implications for the Swedish self-image, since it seems to lead to affirmations of the validity of the Model for a new era, while to many Swedes the content of the Model seems to have changed fundamentally. This is a difficult scientific argument to make, but I would suggest that Swedes, post-1990s, live with a kind of nostalgia for a future lost, a nostalgia which might quite simply be called People’s home nostalgia.

The Danish political scientist Olle Waever has described nostalgia as a Nordic phenomenon, in complex reaction to European integration and to geopolitical change around the Baltic sea, thus having lost a particular future, a path of development once unique, indeed as a kind of collapse of the middle way.<sup>38</sup> However, this nostalgia also clearly has to do with the centrality of the notion of People’s home as a kind of common historical experience and with its fall from grace, post-1960s, as the symbol of security and solidarity in the most modern country of the world.

The 1990s were obviously a national trauma in the sense of the social hardships that they brought along and that had, through the post-war period, almost disappeared from the Swedish public consciousness. With the exception of the turbulent years of the 1970s, there was virtually no unemployment in Sweden throughout the post-war period which also means that there were virtually no memories of unemployment in Swedish society.<sup>39</sup> Suddenly a young generation were confronted with a social reality their parents had never encountered. A generation who grew up in an era of steady welfare expansion was confronted with the end of welfare, or at least, with cutbacks rather than reform.

This process must be seen as a central turnaround in the Swedish national psyche and political consciousness, as the pride in being the most modern country in the world and the feeling of embodying modernity was replaced with a sense of disorientation and loss. The importance of such cultural phenomena is hard to prove in scientific terms, but a look at Swedish popular culture in the present suggests this quite clearly. Some of the most prominent cultural expressions seem to be related exactly to the memory, even if

this memory is far from uncontested, of the People's home. In the film *Du levande* by filmmaker Roy Andersson, for instance, people walk around like the dead, looking for a future disappeared.<sup>40</sup> The photographer Lars Tunbjörk systematically depicts the material and human wrecks of the Swedish model, the leftover pieces of the People's home in once utopian housing projects or former industrial towns.<sup>41</sup> World-renowned painter Karin Mamma Andersson's fame comes from her series of paintings of deserted houses and forgotten interiors, where pieces of furniture, easily recognized by any contemporary Swede as the furniture of the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, stand around like the remains of an archaeological site.<sup>42</sup>

A noticeable phenomenon in Swedish cultural and political debate, beginning in the mid 1990s (and corresponding, largely, with the turnaround of economic crisis and the reining in of the budget deficit), has been the return and even rehabilitation of the notion of the People's home. In the late 1990s, everything from bars to television chat shows and interior decoration shops were suddenly named *folkhemmet* – quite like in Eastern Europe, 10 years after the Velvet Revolution, bars and restaurants opened named Pravda or Checkpoint Charlie, feeding of a growing 'Ossie' nostalgia and disaffection with the pace and direction of change. Nineteen-thirties and 1950s architecture and artefacts have become increasingly popular in the boom years of the early 2000s, where we have seen the construction of notions of a particular Scandinavian aesthetics, in everything from furniture to film and literature.<sup>43</sup>

In this way, the People's home has become a kind of paradise lost or future past (which is of course one of the central forms of utopian thinking) in which notions of the old, 1930s or post-war functionalist and rationalist society are glorified while change becomes something fearful and troubling. Paradoxically, this was true even of the 2006 election which saw, on the one hand, all parties struggle for the ownership of the notions of the People's home and the Swedish model, and on the other, calls for change. The change called for was not radical change in the form of the *systemsiftesdebatt* of the 1980s and 1990s, but rather change that would entrench the People's home and 'return' to the values of the Model – hard work, social peace and crash courses in Swedish mentality for immigrants.

There are specific problems with this new nostalgic meaning to the notion of the People's home. Clearly, the 1990s and 2000s have seen a return, in European politics quite generally, of nationalism and nationalist expressions even if the form these take is different from the interwar period or the 19th century. The much announced demise of the nation state in the wake of globalization seems to have triggered new cultural and political expressions, in which national values, identity and even national character are increasingly at a premium.<sup>44</sup> I would suggest that this can be tentatively explained in the light of thoroughgoing transformations in European society – to do with rapid industrial change, diversity and European integration, but also to the reinvention of politics themselves and the creation, in the 1990s, of a new political centre field where rivalling political articulations have merged together in a kind of political appeal to the common good and the values of the nation and the people. So in France, Britain and Holland, diversity and communitarianism has triggered political responses around the values of the French republic, notably *laïcité*, the values of Britishness and 'the British genius', and the openness of Dutch culture – values that are seen as entrenched in national

history and national character and elevated to the values of the ‘people’ in response to the perceived threat of immigrant communities to these very defining values.<sup>45</sup>

In Sweden, the debate on Swedishness that took place in 2005 and 2006 was very clearly about such perceived threats, from particularly Muslim communities, to the values of Nordic modernity – gender equality, the work ethic, secular Protestantism – but also to the consensus culture of the Swedish model and its fundamental underlying assumptions of sameness and cultural homogeneity. Historians Berggren and Trägårdh's book *Är svensken människa* came as a kind of delayed response to the post-colonial debate that has entered Swedish academic and public debate in the early 2000s. From post-colonial perspectives, scholars have shown that the trade unions of the Model have systematically discriminated immigrant workers, that the notion of universalism that underpins Swedish social policy has strong excluding effects on vulnerable groups of the population, and that the very notion of People's home contains important and still vital allusions to an ethnic entity, the *folk*.<sup>46</sup> At least two important debates on Swedishness have taken place in the last years which have questioned the links between the peoples home and Swedishness – the debate around the *Utredningen om strukturell diskriminering*, the results of which were rapidly dismissed by both government, media and academia as biased and unconvincing, and the *Gringodebatten*, a debate about the proper use of the Swedish language which began around the publication of a new magazine written in so-called *Rinkeby-* (or *blatte-*)*svenska*, the Swedish spoken in highly segregated parts of suburban Stockholm.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly enough, Berggren and Trägårdh did not even mention these debates, which is quite in line with how they have also been rapidly silenced by the general debate in Sweden. Meanwhile, Swedishness is today a concept that is not only accepted in mainstream political debate but that is also increasingly claimed by the Swedish extreme right, the *Sverigedemokraterna* who are steadily gaining points in the Swedish electoral system. The idea of the People's home occupies a central position in their political propaganda – with the message, of course, that it is under siege.<sup>48</sup>

In addition, notions of globalization and a new economy built on intangibles such as creativity and trust has further triggered this debate. The idea of the knowledge or information economy, on the European level, has clearly been influenced by a kind of neocolonial figure of thought, in which the European Enlightenment heritage is seen as a source of creativity and competitive advantage towards lesser cultures such as ‘Chindia’. This discourse has been particularly prominent in the UK, where Britishness has emerged as a discourse in the 1990s and 2000s that merges notions of British identity with the qualities in demand in the new economy: flexibility, industriousness, ingenuity. Quite similarly, in Sweden, the idea of the knowledge economy has been discursively constructed as a logical continuation of Swedish modernity and drawing on fundamental elements of Swedish political culture, particularly in a specific political culture built around workers education, a rationalist and pragmatic reformism and not superstition, and long legacies of institutions for spreading knowledge – study circles, public libraries, one of the world's oldest systems for public education (*folkskolan*). So one of the speeches on the knowledge economy by the former PM starts, *We could read more than others could*.<sup>49</sup> In this narrative, the process of structural change, even when oftentimes it might appear as a fundamental transformation of the values of the People's home, becomes a logical continuation of its teleological trajectory.<sup>50</sup>

## Concluding remarks

I would suggest that also European integration and the debate in the last years on the European social model has triggered these nationalist responses, since the idea of social model is something that is strongly associated with different national cultures and with different images of modernity.<sup>51</sup> In Sweden, it has clearly given rise to a kind of welfare nationalism, in which European integration and the Others that it brings with it is seen as a threat to the architecture and values of the Model, its collective agreements, wage bargaining system and labour law. This seems to contain more, however, than mere protectionist stances around specific institutional arrangements – it seems to be about the very role of the Model as Swedish self-image and identity.<sup>52</sup> It reflects, as Nordic historians have pointed out before, a long-standing tradition in Sweden's highly ambiguous relationship to Europe – we are happy to export our Model and teach its values to a surrounding European culture perceived as Catholic, conservative and latently corrupt, but less so to learn from it. Since the 1970s the Swedish interest in the EU has lain in the potential of bringing reform and modernity to Europe, while it is also understood as potentially threatening the foundations of the Model.<sup>53</sup>

In addition, the nostalgic reappraisals of the People's home in the 1990s say something about the relationship to history, and the uses of history, in contemporary Swedish politics. As one of the reviewers of this article correctly points out, nostalgia is a pathological condition bordering on depression.<sup>54</sup> As such, a nostalgic reappraisal of the past stands opposite to a progressive use of the past, as an inclusive source of identity and as a way of situating us in time without resorting to teleological arguments that are, by definition, exclusive. I would suggest that recent decades in Sweden have been characterized by a failure to challenge nostalgic notions of the past and by a failure, by politicians and the academic community, to claim the past as a source of constructive rethinking of the Swedish identity rather than as a source of isolation. Clearly, one of the characteristics of politics in postmodern times is that they are directly historiographical in character – looking to history for sources of identity in a time where, allegedly, all identities are in flux.<sup>55</sup> This is not in itself a new phenomenon, but it is one that requires serious attention also from the historical community.

## Notes

- 1 *Världens modernaste land.*
- 2 Hirdman, *Att lägga livet till rätta*; Rothstein, *Just Institutions Matter.*
- 3 Runcis, *Steriliseringar i folkhemmet*; Broberg and Roll-Hansen, *Eugenics and the Welfare State*; Broberg and Tydén, *Oönskade i folkhemmet*; Tydén, *Från politik till praktik*; Spektorowski and Mizrachi, 'Eugenics and the Welfare State in Sweden'.
- 4 In recent years, see Tydén and Lundberg, *Sverigebilder.*
- 5 Isacson, 'Bruket och folkhemmet'; Österberg, 'Vardagens sträva samförstånd'.
- 6 Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia.*
- 7 Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian Model*, 10; Stråth and Sørensen, *The Cultural Construction of Norden*; Götz, *Ungleiche Geschwister.*
- 8 Childs, *Sweden: The Middle Way.*

- 9 Berggren and Trägårdh, *Är svensken människa*, 11.
- 10 They were quite right to point out, as however many historians have done before them, that the notion of the People's home has much longer origins in Swedish history than social democracy and that it came out of conservative discourses of the 19th century. See Lagergren, *På andra sidan välfärdsstaten*; Björck, *Folkhemsbyggare*.
- 11 Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.
- 12 Crosland, *The Future of Socialism*.
- 13 Taylor, *Sweden: Proof That a Better World Is Possible*; Brown, *Fishing in Utopia*.
- 14 The idea that Sweden would have the highest level of suicide is in the world is a myth which, I believe, came out of the Reagan campaign in the US in the early 1980s.
- 15 Huntford, *The New Totalitarians*.
- 16 Lindert, *Growing Public*.
- 17 See <http://www.slate.com/id/2203433/>.
- 18 Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, 23, 25, 27. Stråth, 'Nordic Modernity'.
- 19 Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*. Andersson, *När framtiden redan har hänt*.
- 20 Stråth and Sørensen, *The Cultural Construction of Norden*.
- 21 In Vaxholm, the Swedish construction workers union put a construction site under blockade because it employed Lithuanian workers who were not unionized in Sweden and had no collective agreement.
- 22 Waever and Hansen, *European Integration and National Identity*.
- 23 Bastow and Martin, *Third Way Discourse*.
- 24 Östberg and Thullberg, *Den svenska modellen*; Stephens, *The Transition from Socialism to Capitalism*.
- 25 'The New Swedish Model, a Reform Agenda for Growth and the Environment', *Financial Times*/London School of Economics Future of Europe Lecture series, London, 26 February 2008.
- 26 Wiklund, *I det modernas landskap*.
- 27 Mishra, *The Welfare State in Crisis*; Freeman, Swedenborg and Topel, *The Welfare State in Transition, Reforming the Swedish Model*.
- 28 Andersson, *Between Growth and Security*.
- 29 *Maktutredningen*, 1985–1990.
- 30 Persson, *Den som är satt i skuld är icke fri*.
- 31 See Tydén and Lundberg, 'Inledning'.
- 32 Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*.
- 33 Opening address to SAP party conference, Stockholm 2000, in Persson, *Tankar och tal 1996–2000*.
- 34 See for instance the Sapir report, *An Agenda for a Growing Europe*.
- 35 Miliband, 'Nordic Light'.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 French notions of the Nordic model have been described by the Figaro journalist, Marie-Laure Faulon: Faulon, *Le rébond du modèle Nordique*.
- 38 Waever and Hansen, *European Integration and National Identity*.
- 39 Lindvall, *Ett land som alla andra*.
- 40 Andersson, *Du levande*.
- 41 Tunbjörk, *The Country Beside Itself*; Tunbjörk, *Vinter*.
- 42 *Mamma Andersson*, exhibition catalogue.
- 43 Andersson, *The Workshop and the Library*.

- 44 Hall, 'Flaggor och loggor'; Hall, *Den svenskaste historien*.
- 45 Alibhai Brown, *Who Do We Think We Are?*; Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam*; Noiriél, *The French Melting Pot*.
- 46 De los Reyes, *Diversity and Differentiation*; Lindberg, Amin and Dahlstedt, *Det slutna folkhemmet*.
- 47 *Integrationens svarta bok : agenda för jämlikhet och social sammanhållning*.
- 48 von Essen and Fleischer, *Sverigedemokraterna i de svenska kommunerna*.
- 49 Göran Persson, speech to *Svenska industritjänstemannaförbundet*, 15 November 2002.
- 50 Andersson, *The Library and the Workshop*.
- 51 See Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries*.
- 52 Waever, 'Nordic Nostalgia'.
- 53 Waever and Hansen, *European Integration and National Identity*; Stråth, *Folkhemmet mot Europa*; af Malmborg, *Den ståndaktiga nationalstaten*.
- 54 Anonymous reviewer to *Scandinavian Journal of History*, January 2009.
- 55 Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*.

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