"Just Look at Sweden!": Archaeology of a Conditioned Response

Piero Colla[*]

Abstract. Ever since the 1930s, the notion of "Swedish exceptionalism" has been a constant in the Western European consciousness. Since the very outset, the image of this nation-laboratory has engendered both fascination and repulsion. Its political and social experiences have been consistently interpreted and transfigured according to two meta-narratives, describing a technical modernity that offers either salvation or a threat. Even the rhetoric surrounding the "exhaustion" of the model turns out to be a topos that is recycled over and over again. The historical development of the role that an imaginary Sweden is called upon to play – as an exemplar of peaceful resolution of class conflict, a prototype of an individualistic society or a technocratic Big Brother – mirrors the relationship that the European collective mind-set of the 20th century (and beyond?) maintains with its own values, in which it seems that dreams and fears must be embodied in a concrete, "distant" society in order to be represented or exorcised.

Keywords. Swedish Model, Collective imagination, National Identity.

The political borders of the world into which I was born, in 1968, were more hermetic than those of today. The Nation (like the family) still provided a conceptual framework that was stable and *authoritative* enough to justify a revolt against its authority. By contrast, the imaginary was drawn as never before to the distant: our TV screens relayed images of Man on the moon to towns and villages, while in cinemas Marco Bellocchio's latest film spelled out the message that *China is Near* (1967). Over the following years, a kaleidoscope of exotic images must have imprinted itself upon my subconscious: Cuban artwork, Chilean songs, Ho Chi Minh's goatee beard. That short-lived politicisation of the private may well have been a narcissistic reflex; but the fact remains that before technology led us to confuse our very nature with the medium of an information flow ("are you disconnected?"), the world offered a mythological density in which geo-cultural otherness was charged with potential. When, in 1989, I decided to write my dissertation on the Swedish welfare model and its cultural background, I was perhaps trying to catch the last train to Utopia incarnate: the last fairy tale with a happy ending.

The purpose of this essay is to revisit the accepted background – the *doxa* – that frames the way we define a research subject, the questions we ask about it and the way our analysis is received. We will posit the hypothesis that this imprinting ends up interacting with the subject itself; in other words, a common sense – in projecting shared expectations or concerns onto a given social situation – ultimately plays a part in *making* history, rather than contaminating the way it is perceived by its protagonists or those who interpret it.

1. *The myth defeated: the rhetorics of "back to reality"*

Let's start from the end. Does anything remain of what made the refugees from Utopia see 20th century Sweden as their last hope? *"The Swedish Model"*, *"le modèle suédois"*... the shared understanding referred to above outlines a *koine* in European political terminology. But – for the post-1989 generation – it evokes a twilight that is eternally postponed. To understand the attraction for such different personalities as Dubček, Pompidou[1] or the Italian communist Pietro Ingrao

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[*] *European Economic and Social Committee* (Brussels). Currently completing a Ph.D. in Social Sciences at the *Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales* in Paris; E-Mail <Piero.Colla@eesc.europa.eu>.
[1] "A Sweden with a bit more sunshine" was the phrase he used to describe to a group of journalists his vision of a France that could combine technological progress with social harmony.

(Ingrao, 1984) of a "third way" between surrendering to the bourgeois social order and the quick fix offered by an authoritarian collectivism, now requires an exercise in alienation: Sweden has gone from benchmark to conceptual embarrassment. Even in the geopolitical *doxa*, Sweden's legendary neutrality and refusal to strike alliances have taken on an anecdotal quality. Since 1945, no other nation has been so consistently identified with international law and its instruments.[2] Carl Bild, the luckless EU mediator in the Yugoslav crisis of 1995, and the equally unsuccessful attempts by the UN's chief weapons inspector, Hans Blix, to avert the Iraq War, symbolise the latter-day decline of the myth. Notwithstanding a short-lived revival, prompted by the prospect of the triumph of an open society in post-communist Eastern Europe, the political discourse no longer depicts Sweden in terms of a concrete social paradigm Even in Italy, a xenophile country by nature and by historical necessity, any normative reference to foreign models now seems outmoded.

The collapse of the metanarratives of the 20th century imaginary did not leave the "Swedish model" unscathed. Nevertheless, its evocative power has proved more resistant than that of other forms of "Utopia realised". Cassirer reminds us that, rather than merely designating an object, the conceptual properties of the myth symbolically embrace the person who articulates them – along with his hopes and aspirations; indeed, the desires projected on the object through language become an inseparable part of it (Cassirer, 1925). As an expression, "the Swedish Model" articulates a remarkable overlapping of historical fact and judgment, subject and object, morality and nature. While any "model" is, of necessity, just that from the point of view of the observer (indeed, the term came into Swedish as a calque from other languages), the Swedish Model is a metahistorical concept; not merely a socio-political project, but rather a *Weltanschauung* that is one in substance with this particular process of nation-building. Neither the ideals of 1789, the "American Dream" or the Soviet Union's foundation myth involve a similar interpenetration of ethos and ethnos, being and having to be. This is perhaps why the decline of this dream-made-flesh has not undermined a poetics of Swedish society and its achievements – as emerges unfailingly in readings of the crime fiction of Henning Mankell or Stieg Larsson (Forshaw, 2010), in film criticism and in political narrative. If anything, the rhetoric of decline appears to crystallise in a *topos,* one which is unverifiable and therefore true by definition (Durand, 1994; Silverman, 1998; Truc, 2006). If a collective projection such as this can be regarded as a concrete entity – a *fact* – what is remarkable from a historical perspective is the way that the "Swedish Dream" is repeatedly associated with decline, or a gradual return to "normality". Its milestones include 1969 (wildcat strike by the miners in Norrland), 1976 (the Swedish Social Democratic Worker's Party loses power), 1986 (assassination of Olof Palme), 1992 (Swedish crown ejected from the EMS) and 1994 (referendum on EU accession).[3] Despite these mounting signs of "normality", the situation in Sweden continued to be discussed in terms of the end of an exception – an approach which specifically acknowledges its presumed moral superiority. A 1997 *Le Monde* article addressing the scale of eugenic sterilisation in Sweden speaks of "the decomposition of a social protection model" (Peltier, 1997); the 2006 elections still provide an opportunity for a paean to a "model of social peace" (Truc, 2006) and four years later, the admission of a xenophobic party to the *Riksdag* is seen as a sign of "the *normalisation* of Swedish politics" (Alicante, 2010). The media coverage of these events always contains a note of reproach, the dominant theme being the betrayal of a seductive promise. The sensational headlines in *Der Spiegel*[4] referring to the growing number of cases in which social workers removed children from the care of their parents, marks the beginning of an iconoclastic mood that Witoszek and Trägårdh summed up so vividly a few years ago: in Sweden, the trope of the "whore with a heart of gold" is turned on its head to reveal an "ex-virgin with the heart of a whore" (Trägårdh and Witoszek, 2002, Introduction).

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[2] The tragic fate of Folke Bernadotte (the first UN mediator, who was killed in Jerusalem in 1948) and Dag Hammarskjöld (UN Secretary-General from 1953 to 1961) are emblematic of this commitment.

[3] After the historic collapse in 1991, the SAP won three elections and ruled continuously from 1994 to 2006.

[4] "Kinder-Gulag im Sozialstaat Schweden". In *Der Spiegel*, 1 August 1983.

The emotional scale of this change of tack provides, I believe, an indication of the dream's importance in the collective political imagination. The recurrence of certain themes (with, first and foremost, the relationship between the State and the individual and the sacred nature of power in its modern incarnation, i.e. the rational administration of the public interest) helps us find our way through the haze of values that the European consciousness, having lost its star pupil, is trying to reassess. In other words, it could be that the way the crisis is presented enables Europe to exorcise the decline of its own certainties by transferring the problem elsewhere. Before taking a closer look at the historical depth of this projection, we need first to shed light on some aspects of the system of underivable (i.e. mythical) concepts that the Swedish experience embodies. The media coverage of the murder of Olof Palme and, more recently, of the assassination of Foreign Minister Anna Lindh (2003) dramatises the unfathomable nature of these events, and hence the predicament of a political class that is unable to express itself openly or prove itself deserving of our trust. The condemnation of the human costs of social engineering and of the intrusiveness of the welfare system are part of a painful period of grieving for the ethical driver of modernity, i.e. a belief in the virtuous implementation of the instruments of democracy and in its ability to curb the violent or tribal traits inherent in social relations. The disillusionment surrounding the Swedish experience prompts a question about the limitations of progress and, consequently, of our power over ourselves. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger put it in the early 1980s:

The Good Shepherd believes that the world is governed by intentions, whether good or evil [...]. But what if the metaphor of the Good Shepherd were a nonsense? What if, to put it theoretically, human evolution were a *stochastic* process? (Enzensberger, 1982, p. 41)

It is, however, legitimate to ask why it is that Sweden automatically serves as a transference object to cope with a sense of loss while the obvious implication remains unaddressed: could it be that, rather than expressing disillusionment, these constant references to the vulnerability of the system say something about its enduring evocative power? In our quest for an answer, we need to return to the genesis of the myth and historicise it.

2. History of a revelation: *the Middle Way*

The dire warnings of the crisis of liberal capitalism – the Kreuger Crash and the Ådalen shooting in 1931 – paved the way for the SAP to enter government. In the aftermath of its electoral success and just a few months after Hitler became Chancellor, the party of P.A. Hansson formed an alliance with the party that had the least in common with its political programme: the Agrarian Party. This marriage of convenience, underpinned by support for agriculture and counter-cyclical employment policies, provided a more effective antidote to the nationalist temptations of the bourgeoisie than the mass rituals of the *Front Populaire.* Similarly, the crisis of democracy in the 1930s provided fertile terrain for the international myth of a happy, different Sweden to flourish. The first best-seller of a genre that became firmly established after the Soviet revolution – the social apology in the form of a travel journal – was authored by an American, Marquis Childs. This in-depth account, published in 1936, does not see Sweden as just one of several other "examples", but as an ideal type: it is "the middle way" (Childs, 1936). Instead of dwelling on the new political leadership, Childs describes the profusion of multipliers of social solidarity, including agricultural cooperatives, trade unions and local associations. A daily helping of efficient administration, participation and a spontaneous outpouring of social justice had steered the Swede, like some faithful, diligent schoolboy, towards the greater good: cooperation between the two sides of industry had neutered all conflict. The book is a taster of the key features of half a century of writing devoted to the "model": the country is described, on the one hand, as an experimental universe, determined to strike a balance between the dead-end offered by *laissez-faire* individualism and Marxist collectivism; and, on the other, as a practical illustration of a *virtuous* state of mind, in which every component of the social machine

evokes the perfection of the whole, free from the poison of uncompromising passion, radicalism and intolerance. On the first front, the praise Childs heaps upon the Swedish example is obviously influenced by a desire to cobble together a thesis that can be applied to the political debate in America. He counters those critics who labelled Roosevelt's New Deal as a Marxist deviation with an example of reform that is compatible with the promises (and convenience) of modernisation. At the same time, in a pattern that is repeated regularly, his vision becomes akin to a philosophical demonstration: not so much a confirmation of the effectiveness of a formula as a reassuring vision of a better humankind, one that can hold a mirror up to a European democracy threatened by fascism and the spectre of war and reflect the image of its own folly. Long before it became a refuge for the future architects of Europe from Willy Brandt to Bruno Kreisky, Sweden became a place of pilgrimage for socialists in search of solutions to the crisis of reformism in Europe: *Democratic Sweden,* published in 1938 by the Fabian Society in London, is the first extensive compendium of the transformation implemented by a *functional* socialism. The myth spread simultaneously beyond the Anglosphere. To Serge de Chessin, Press Officer at the French Embassy and author of a number of essays on the Bolshevik "apocalypse", Sweden appeared to be a peaceful place both without and within; a haven spared from ideological fervour and class hatred. De Chessin is writing for a bourgeois readership and alternates tourist information with socio-political analysis. But even in the pages describing the Stockholm skyline or the customs of the court, he sees Sweden as being on a steady journey towards the promise of a new era, with equality of conditions, gender equality and support for the most vulnerable.

Another recurring theme is the contrast between a Europe intent on celebrating its past glories and the iconoclastic exuberance of a "young" society. The image of an organised, forward-looking society is overwhelming even when he is ostensibly writing about tourism:

In order to discern the tiniest wrinkle on the face of Stockholm one must arm oneself with a magnifying lens [...]. New spacious developments are appearing on all sides [...] as if freshly ironed every morning. Big modern buildings are springing up everywhere, fronted by huge shining windows (de Chessin, 1935, p. 11).

From this absolutist rhetoric emerge two patterns of discourse that are inspired by the model discussed above: on the one hand, we have a reassuring picture of a Sweden that is "still the same", clinging to its unchanging institutions and customs and able to combine order with modernity; on the other, we have an experimental Sweden that favours an uncompromising pragmatism: a fascinating or terrible prediction of "what we will become."

3. The other side of the "Happy City"

After 1945, a Europe threatened by nuclear war and left hanging in the balance somewhere between the trauma induced by its own civil war and the mirage offered by the consumer society, falls for the charm of a country that miraculously escaped its problems and has the best performance in terms of combining affluence with social justice. Hailed by Anglo-American sociology as a 'prototype' of modernity (Strode, 1949; Jenkins, 1969; Tomasson, 1970), Sweden remains a travel destination for intellectuals, and essays by writers such as Graham Greene, Anthony Burgess, Mario Soldati and Susan Sontag only add to its aura of fascination. Confirming its iconic status, the tone of social reportage gives way to a more philosophical inquiry into the impact of the perfect overlap of ideal and achievement: an *ethos* made flesh. Although part of a social transformation whose outcome is uncertain, the Swede is also seen as a product of a fully-realised utopian organisation. The subtitle of the Catholic Emmanuel Mounier's *Notes Scandinaves* (Mounier, 1950) – "on happiness"– is telling. What is most interesting, however, is the fact that alongside the admiration and emulation the Swedish experiment attracts, its supposed success is beginning to prompt some painful questions. Juxtaposing, for the first time, the idea of perfection with crisis, Mounier asks, "what happens to Man" in a civilised socialism whose persuasiveness is winning. The answer

comes in a description of the model existence of Mr Petterson, who comes into the world cossetted by the state's childcare facilities, neighbourhoods with an abundance of medical centres, schools and leisure facilities that offer a sure-fire guarantee of social adaptation. Petterson will then be escorted into adult life by a whole range of student grants, services and all manner of protection against the vagaries of life – including provision for the day he has to bury his wife! Mounier realises that this arrangement is not an end in itself but rather that it tends to steer a human being's social instincts towards a *reasonable*, socially acceptable individualism: "if one day Mr Petterson sits down to think, his thoughts won't be in the clouds" (Mounier, 1950, p. 270). The comment veers from the panegyric to the perplexed: the rhetoric describing a perfect success serves as a ploy to express doubt. The other side of the coin emerges in the Orwellian description of the Swedish home in which "bad taste has left and taken good taste with it": egalitarianism becomes an exercise in alienation:

Let's return to Mr Petterson's apartment and step inside. It is hard to say whether we are in the home of an emplyee or a doctor: everywhere there is the same monotonous comfort, the model kitchen – gleaming and electric, the standard fitted cupboards, the large windows that swallow up the dull days (Mounier, 1950, p. 274).

Carlo Levi, stopping off in Stockholm after a euphoric visit to the USSR, writes with the same ambivalence (Levi, 1956); in its everyday form, the Swedish utopia garners less support from the literati than from doctors, urban planners and social scientists. We are still some way from the catastrophic tones of the following decade (Altavilla, 1967; Soldati, 1970), but in the resurgence of humanism ushered in by 1968, concerns about the disorientation of the individual in a highly organised world start to gain ground over a eulogising view of industrial harmony and top-down modernisation. What remains throughout is that, even in its most unnerving aspects, Sweden speaks about *us*: in the problems it has with the psychosocial management of affluence, Mounier sees "the problem of tomorrow's world" (Mounier, 1950, p. 286).

In an attempt to curb this anxiety, the literature about Sweden would resort to new comforting clichés: demonstrating the subversive potential of the human factor, even in the realms of organisation and technology, "the percentage of people with a mental illness", writes Mounier, "is the highest in Europe: a sure sign of resistance to a sleep-inducing happiness" (Mounier, 1950, p. 283). A few years later, the Swedish paradigm would be exploited politically to illustrate the perverse effects of rational humanism: in 1960, Dwight Eisenhower put the success of this "friendly country" down to the three "S"s for which it is famous: *Sin, Suicide and Socialism.* Even in the euphoria of affluence, the first signs of the country's faltering image (Karlsson, 2004) are carefully recorded in the Swedish press, outlining an area of interaction between its self-identity and the mirror that reflects the view from abroad: both the mythology of the "model" and the attacks upon it are used as an opportunity to stress its national attributes, as in this 1961 review of Kathleen Nott's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place: A Private View of Sweden*:

Let it be said once and for all that this criticism of Sweden (*Sverigekritik*), all these sneering attacks on our Welfare system, are boorish, biased, uninformed and in some cases appallingly cynical [...]. Our social structures, our respect for human dignity [...] have deprived us of nothing essential [...]. It is far better to live in Sweden than in any other country (Gustafsson, 1961).

4. The myth of Modern Sweden and the reinvention of *svenskhet*

Spats like these reveal a key component in the making of the myth: the interaction between the myth and the image Swedes have of themselves, and the synergy produced by the two approaches. This mutual exchange is one of the reasons why, in the mid-1930s, so many expectations converged on a nation in which famine and mass emigration to the United States were still fresh in the memory. Although the legal structures underpinning the image of the "model" welfare state would not be fleshed out until the mid-1960s, the image of a forward-looking country was already the

subject of public acclaim some 30 years earlier. In 1930, the Stockholm Exhibition used the aesthetics of functionalism to showcase the basic principles of the model: simplicity and practicality of form, a synthesis of order and mass accessibility, science and a down-to-earth approach. Inside the pavilions, social ideals merged seamlessly with the industrial miracle: the Swedish history pavilion, for example, presented the technological achievements of major industrial concerns such as Ericsson as the logical continuation of the conquering mentality of the Vikings.[5] The symbolism of the *functional home* anticipates the way an informal modern aesthetic would be raised to the status of a national symbol – one which the Ikea brand has helped to spread throughout the world. This demonstrates just how early the quest to be "best in the world" fed into the national ego, providing symbolic material for a new inspiring narrative.

Over the years, official support was provided to bolster the image. The Second World War marked a watershed: the national self-image officially became one with the myth, in a kind of secular catechism. In 1941, the Swedish State Information Board, an opinion-building body set up during the Second World War, launched a correspondence course on the "Swedish way of life":[6] the idea that a no-nonsense mindset (saklighet), a right to a say in decision-making and to the enjoyment of freedom were a natural part of this way of life, was used to allay any fears about the war and to bond the Nation to its new leaders. In the immediate post-war years, this approach would become essential to its diplomacy: the halo of moral immunity surrounding the image of Sweden would help to erase the memory of the major concessions the Hansson government had made to Hitler's Germany[7]. In 1945, *Svenska Institutet* – a body tasked with using publications, exhibitions, and study visits to manage Sweden's image abroad – rose from the ashes of the State Information Board and a new concept gradually emerged: *Sverigebilden* – "the image of Sweden abroad". Even today, the *Svenska Institutet* website monitors Sweden's position in the international development and quality of life league tables, noting any on-going political upsets that might dent the national reputation.[8]

If we accept that the iconic "model" is not just the projection of a nation in search of an identity, but also its mainstay[9], we can only imagine the havoc that the crisis of the model must have played in the national debate. While the reversal of the myth, as embodied in Huntford's vituperative critique (Huntford, 1972), has given the Swedish public cause to question the absolutes on which it had built its own self-image[10], the country does not yet seem ready to give them up altogether; this can be seen in the hostile reaction towards any attempts to belittle the myth of the *folkhem* by evoking an institutionalised racism without parallel in the democratic world (Colla, 2000), or the ambiguities inherent in the State-sponsored multiculturalism that was launched in 1975 (another "first" in Europe). These are signs of the vulnerability that an overdependence on outside opinion has allowed to worm its way into the national psyche: the comfort provided by the admiration of others has turned into a straitjacket. Consequently, every attack triggers a reaction in the form of a communication strategy: in the wake of media revelations of the Swedish Central Bank's behind-the-scenes role in recycling Jewish assets seized by the Third Reich, the government organised the Stockholm International Forum on the Holocaust, in an illustration of a psychological reflex that

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[5] In an article for *L'Illustration,* Serge de Chessin highlights the educational message implicit in the Exhibition: "We would advise anyone who wants to see the city of the future, as envisioned by some of the most avant-garde architects [...] to take the train to Stockholm" (de Chessin, 1930).

[6] *Den svenska livsformen*, Kooperativa förbundet, Stockholm 1941.

[7] It is no coincidence that this memory resurfaces in tandem with the decline of the moral profile of the "model" (Colla, 2002).

[8] http://www.si.se/Svenska/Innehall/Sverige-i-varlden/Rapportserie-Sverigebilden/

[9] In this respect, some of the slogans from the electoral campaigns of the late 20th century are almost touching: "The most equal country in the world", "The best schools in Europe", "Sweden is fantastic!" ... Even today this self-understanding is a leitmotiv in the traditional May Day speeches of SAP leaders, Swedish Tourist Board brochures and, of course, in Swedish Eurosceptic literature.

[10] The sudden interest intellectuals began to show in the national ethos and its unspoken codes is a sign of this re-awakening from the dream. In 1984, Arne Ruth's brilliant essay (Ruth, 1984) was one of the first signs of this new awareness.

feels the need to shore up its faltering external image. This dilemma resurfaced when Sweden joined the European Union, for how could a nation that had identified its own myth in the exceptionalism of its own destiny see the advantage in the embrace of a continent that was, by definition, backward and *papist*? Once again, the temptation to fall back on Swedish supremacy was too strong: in all seriousness, the advocates of a Yes vote in the 1994 referendum insisted that it was not so much a question of the EU letting Sweden in, as of "swedishising" (*försvenska*) the EU!

In this escape from reality, the Swedish mindset finds an unlikely refuge in a bewildered Europe's desire for absolutes: having lost all its "models", the EU is unlikely to stop thinking of the Swedish model in its twin guise of paradise lost and of phoenix rising from its own ashes. Yet the two narratives are only apparently mutually exclusive: the orphans of Utopia are not seeking to prove to themselves that the "sound investments" they had made were "real", but to safeguard the symbolic representations (technology as a liberation or a threat, the ethical State as a goal or a limitation, etc.) that enable them to protect their investment without losing their way. The "Swedish myth" and the "myth of Sweden" essentially speak the same language.

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