

Who Are We Now Then? The Swedish Welfare State in Political Memory and Identity

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Abstract: In the late 1980s and early 1990s the Swedish welfare state underwent a crisis which led to a transformation of society that has continued up until today. The main node of this has been an adjustment to the global ideological trend of privatization and individualism with a down-sized public sector ruled by market logic. Parallel with this Sweden has also changed from being relatively mono-cultural to becoming a more multicultural nation. Throughout these processes one constant has been how the memory of the traditional Swedish welfare state has been used and fought over by different political parties. This article deals with the struggle to appropriate this memory.

The Social Democrats, in power for most of the twentieth century, are seen as the architects of the *Folkhem* ("The Home of the People"). But it was also the Social Democrats who – under pressure from global economy – initiated the neoliberal transformation through a series of decisions in the 1980s. Rhetorically they have treated this in two ways: one is through arguing that nothing really changed and one is through pointing out how much has changed but without acknowledging their own part in it. The ruling right-wing party The Moderates has done so through changing their rhetoric from criticizing the Social Democratic welfare state to now being the

only ones representing its core values and the only ones capable of adapting them to a new situation. Furthermore, the *Folkhem*-metaphor has also been central for the xenophobic far-right (Sweden Democrats), claiming that the demise of the welfare state is the result of excessive immigration.

Keywords: Welfare state, cultural memory, political memory, political rhetoric, Swedish political history.

I. INTRODUCTION

This article concerns the function of memory in the Swedish political landscape and the Swedish political rhetoric. The concept of cultural memory with its focus on mediated memory and culturally mediated understandings can be used as a central theoretical vehicle in this endeavour (Confino 1997: 1390).

The aim of this article is to outline the development of the memory of the traditional welfare state in Swedish politics and how it is used and articulated in different political rhetoric.

The article follows these steps: first an introduction to the historical background and the traditional Swed-

ish welfare state project as well as the meaning of this history, then a description of how three political parties – left-centrist, neoliberal right, and populist right – use this history in their rhetoric in relation to the continuous retrenchment of the welfare state beginning in the late 1980s, and finally a short concluding discussion of the relation between cultural memory, political rhetoric, political reality and ideology.

II. THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE PROJECT

The story of the Swedish welfare state project is long and complicated, but it is intimately tied to the Social Democratic party who ruled Sweden from 1920 to 1976, and then from 1982 to 1991 and 1994 to 2006. This means that but for some brief interventions, they ruled Sweden for the whole of the twentieth century. Since 2006 however, Sweden has had a liberal rightist government.

During the twentieth century, Sweden as a modern, progressive democratic welfare state was created. It can be summed up by the metaphor that became the name for the vision, used by then Social Democratic leader Per-Albin Hansson: *Folkhem* (literally translated into “The Home of the People”). He defined it in this way in a famous speech in 1928:

“The basis of the home is commonality and mutuality. A good home is not aware of any privileged or slighted, no darlings and no stepchildren. You see no one despise the other, no one who tries not gain advantage at the expense of others, the strong does not press down and plunder the weak. In the good home you find compassion, cooperation, helpfulness.” (Hansson 2010: 57, my translation).

Folkhemmet became the name for the Social Democratic project during the twentieth century that included keynesian economics, structural welfare reforms, high and progressive taxes and a constantly expanding social safety net (for example Bergström 1988 and Stråth 1998). It also, however, had a dark side that should be remembered: Along with welfare reforms you could also find eugenics and sterilization campaigns (Broberg & Tydén 1991).

Many things can be said of this historical project, but three things can be especially noted:

First, there has always been an element of social fantasy in the construction of the project regarding the relationship between the political practicalities and the ideological vision. What was often defined and understood as a realization of an ideological vision, many times were political compromises legitimized afterwards. Research has showed that welfare state project was more developed in everyday political praxis, rather than at an ideological drawing board (Stråth 1998: 289).

Secondly, the concept of the *Folkhem* originally comes from conservative circles and as such contains broad ideological possibilities (Dahlqvist 2002: 464–465).

Thirdly, and importantly, the ideological and rhetorical legitimizations of the project were highly successful in creating a strong sense of national identification which meant that Sweden’s self-identity became very much tied to this project. To be a Swede was to be a modern, mildly progressive member of the *Folkhem* and its welfare model (Berg & Sunnemark 2006: 207).

All these three aspects are important when trying to understand how the memory is used today.

Leading up to today is also that in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Swedish welfare state underwent an economic crisis which led to a dramatic transformation of society that thereafter has continued. The main node of this has been an adjustment to the global neoliberal ideological trend of privatization and individualism with a down-sized public sector ruled by market logic (Berg & Sunne- mark 2006: 52–66). Parallel with this Sweden has also changed from being relatively mono-cultural to becoming a more multicultural nation (Lundh 2005). These two aspects have distinctively set the scene for today's Swedish political landscape.

A general reaction to this development has been a kind of identificatory confusion as it also has been connected with becoming a part of the European Union as well as saying no to the Euro (Berg & Sunne- mark 2006: 207–208). The old self-identity has become split between the cultural memory of the traditional welfare state as the definer of Sweden and Swedishness, which represents a security in the national and social identity, and a confusion as a consequence of trying to find new ways of articulating and adapting this memory and identity to a new world and a new situation. Ironically, this has also led to an increasing interest in the earlier Swedish history of kings and wars, especially during economic crises (Hettne, Sörlin och Östergaard 1998: 280).

This confusion has also led to that at the one hand the field of the cultural memory has become more open, there are different ways of claiming the definition of the *Folkhem*, but on the other hand, and at the same time, the very struggle to claim the definition shows how tied the political field and the Swedish self-identity in fact are to the cultural memory of the tradi-

tional welfare state, how it sets the rules for the political rhetoric.

III. CULTURAL MEMORY AS POLITICAL RHETORIC

This duality between the new openness of the memory and the absolute dependency on its legacy has meant different rhetoric and different strategies for different political parties.

A. THE SOCIAL DEMOCRATS

The Social Democrats, as said, carry the identity of being the architects of the welfare state. But it was also they who – under pressure from the global economy – initiated the neoliberal transformation through a series of decisions in the 1980s (Elmbrandt 1998).

Rhetorically they have treated this in two ways: one is through arguing that nothing really has changed and one is through pointing out how much has changed but without acknowledging their own part in it. And they can even seemingly unconsciously do this side by side. It is a paradoxical rhetoric where the traditional welfare state has in large remained intact, while at the same time it has fundamentally changed.

This can be understood as a consequence of the split between ideological vision and political reality. But that begs the question where ideology really is positioned: in what you say or what you do? In the historical legacy of the cultural memory or *in the relation* between the cultural memory and the historical development?

Swedish Social Democracy's identity and self-understanding is always very much connected to their historical legacy. It is often rhetorically used as the kit

that keeps the political vision and reality together, even though they may seem far apart. By evoking the cultural memory of the traditional welfare state and Social Democracy's role in its development, a guarantee and a kind of political amnesty is created: since we represent the memory, we will be by default always loyal to it. This guarantee and the narrative it is created through is a standard theme in their rhetoric. The following is from the party program of 2013:

"When Social Democracy in cooperation with the liberals in a struggle against the right prompted political democracy, the way was opened for people to decide on society and their own lives. Step by step the old class society begun to be torn down to be replaced by a welfare society. Also in our time you can hear that changes are not possible, that we have to adjust to what is decided by forces beyond our control. Social Democracy's answer is the same as it always has been. Through democracy we can change and improve society." (Socialdemokraterna 2013: 3, my translation)

This is the topical story of first the development of political democracy in Sweden (where the importance of the liberals is acknowledged), second of how the Social Democrats created the traditional welfare society. In just two sentences the whole cultural memory is evoked. Then the challenge appears: How is this memory to be related to what may seem to be "forces beyond our control"? This can be interpreted as the forces of the global market, structural neoliberal changes and the seeming impossibility of the welfare state in the old sense. How should Social Democracy and the memory be related to this?

We are the same, the text guarantees. We still represent the same political forces as we always have done. You are safe with us.

As said, this historical legacy is used as the kit between political vision and reality. It attempts to defer from seeing the obvious split between the two. This is based on a strong reliance on the powerfulness of the cultural memory.

The narrative neglects Social Democracy's big part in the structural reformation of the welfare state in the 1980s and 1990s and is thereby related to the rhetorical strategy of claiming that nothing did really fundamentally change during their periods in government. In essence, the traditional welfare state remained intact. A typical example of this rhetoric can be found in the memoirs of former Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson who led governments between 1986–1991 and 1994–1996. When speaking of these years, he states:

"My great challenge as Prime Minister and party leader was to lead Sweden when we after years of progress met a deep and serious economic crisis. It forced my governments to economic, social and political reconsiderations. They were all painful and the critique sometimes got tough.

But we managed to steer the country through the difficulties, the corner stones of the welfare society remained untouched, structural reforms opened up for a new future and Sweden was built strong again. Behind this was a purposeful and carefully thought out policy." (Carlsson 2003: 627, my translation).

This is a version of a narrative that is common in contemporary Social Democratic texts and speeches and it forms an important part in the party's attempt to keep the cultural memory close to its history and identity. The narrative tells of how Sweden came under heavy attack from the global market, found itself in a severe economic crisis and had to make adjustments to the welfare structures. But Social Democracy took

the responsibility and did not only slay the dragon, but also saw to that the fundamental idea as well as the workings of the traditional welfare state remained intact.

This, then, often meets its opposite in the rhetoric. The narrative of how much has changed, that this is not the fault of Social Democracy and that it represents a betrayal of the cultural memory. In the party program of 2013, this narrative is constructed in the following way:

"[A] political shift has taken place in conjunction with the neoliberal wave during the end of the last century. Changes in the economic conditions led to successes for the political right in the world. Powerful economic interests invested enormous resources to legitimize a development toward increasing social and economic differences. The general welfare systems were described as immense bureaucracy that hindered free enterprise and the striving for social equalization was a threat to the freedom of the individual.

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In violation of the knowledge that has been gained from the experiences of the last decades' neoliberal experiment, that is that the societies that strives for social equalization has better conditions for economic development, many countries, including Sweden under right wing governments, has developed policies that consciously has pressed on for widening gaps. The purpose of this policy has been a change of system." (Socialdemokraterna 2013: 30, my translation).

The narrative is in one sense the same as in the nothing-has-changed-rhetoric. Aided by global market forces, a neoliberal wave swept over the world and Sweden had to adapt to that. But while in the former rhetorical strategy this adaptation was done by a So-

cial Democracy that guaranteed that nothing fundamental changed, this strategy focuses on blaming the opposing political side for caving in and consciously developing policies that betrayed the cultural memory and legacy of the traditional welfare state.

Both these strategies and narratives are about the relationship between the cultural memory and political identity. The first is the guarantee that Social Democracy always will be the party that represents it, no matter what, while the second is the claim that the liberal and rightist parties can never do it fully and honestly.

In conclusion, the Social Democrats use the traditional welfare state in a foremost self-identificatory sense, as a part of their identity that they have to relate to. Therefore they also see themselves as the ones, the only ones, that are able to transform and develop the vision in relation to a new globalized situation. They are the only ones that can be trusted to do this, since they are the only ones who really know what it means.

B. THE MODERATES

The ruling right-wing party the Moderates ('Moderaterna') has handled the cultural memory in a peculiar but successful way. For all of their history up until the election of 2006 they were the chief critics of the traditional welfare state, arguing that it taxes people to death and making people dependent on benefits and so on (Nilsson 2004: 177-298). They managed to win one election with a version this rhetoric in 1991, through specific circumstances, but were ousted in the election after (Nilsson 2004: 284).

So in the campaign of 2006 they had learned their lesson and appeared as the "New Moderates" claiming

to be the new work party (which of course is different from the new *workers* party, but still alludes to this). Their rhetoric changed from criticizing the Social Democratic welfare state to constructing themselves as being the only ones representing its core values and the only ones capable of adapting them to a new situation. This was a highly successful rhetoric and they have led the only right-wing government that has been re-elected in Swedish history.

How was this turnaround rhetorically constructed then? A model version of this strategy can be found in Prime Minister and party leader Fredrik Reinfeldt's speech "Sweden the Model Country" given at the working meeting of the Moderates on August 27, 2009.

In this speech three main strategies can be found: The guarantee, the narrative of the development of modern welfare Sweden and the construction of political identity through cultural memory.

The guarantee is about creating a situation of comforting and recognizable safety. The overarching idea, presented in the beginning of the speech, is to declare the political vision of the party as a vision already present in the political traditions of the nation. Reinfeldt says:

"Our ambition with Sweden the Model Country is not that Sweden should become another country. We don't look at other countries to find the values we want to characterize Sweden. The best foundation for our ambitions and ideas are here at home. In our roots. In narratives of our Sweden." (Reinfeldt 2009: 3-4, my translation).

This quote could be interpreted as a flirt with nationalists and right-wing populists as the Sweden Democrats had a strong downwind of opinion at the time, but in relation to the speech as a whole I would argue that it is another, more specific tradition that is evoked.

What he does here is constructing the foundation from where the rest of the speech is developed and it gives meaning to the narrative that is about to follow. The Swedish values, ambitions and ideas he speaks of are connected to the nation's modern history. He uses a modern Swedish modest but at the same time self-righteous nationalism that was never that much about old kings and their battles as about being the best, most modern and welfare-rich nation in the world.

That is the guarantee here: What we do can and should always be understood as a continuation of this development. It is a guarantee that the Moderates are capable of assuming continued responsibility for the welfare project that is central in Swedish history, tradition and identity. They will not challenge these fundamentals.

He then continues by giving his version of the narrative of the Swedish welfare development and the forces behind it. It is seemingly similar to the Social Democratic narrative, but also includes some differences. He says:

"Sweden is a rich country and a functioning welfare society. With able technicians and scientists, with entrepreneurs pressing on, the modern industrial nation was built, a nation that is now transformed to a modern knowledge society. Our wealth has laid the foundation for the welfare systems that equalize differences and gives everyone an opportunity. That supports the vulnerable and enables equality and high participation in working life." (Reinfeldt 2009: 6, my translation).

This represents the New Moderates special mix of traditional Social Democratic rhetoric blended with some hints of their ideological position, though not easily detected due to the strong meaning bearing qualities of the cultural memory. Sweden is a welfare society that was built through common efforts and

through common goals. The goals were to equalize differences and to give everyone an opportunity. So far, the Social Democratic narrative is not challenged in any way and thereby creates opportunities for identification. But the story is also laden with other meanings that in this way is written into the cultural memory: the focus on entrepreneurs, the transformation into a modern knowledge society (which creates demands on new approaches), but foremost the absence of a manifest ideological vision and political ideas in the narrative. The development of the Swedish welfare state is here not a political project, but an economic and pragmatic. This is echoed when Reinfeldt a bit further on says:

“Universal and equal suffrage laid the foundation for a long term Social Democratic holding of power in a country with a large workers population. They led Sweden continuously between 1932 and 1976. Tage Erlander was Prime Minister for 23 years. The Sweden that emerged was not that different to other developed countries as socialists often alleged, but not as bad as bourgeois criticism sometimes wanted to maintain.” (Reinfeldt 2009: 17, my translation).

Here Reinfeldt makes direct, explicit contact with the cultural memory of the traditional welfare state and the national narrative of its development. By stressing its pragmatic sides, he attempts to drape himself in the identity of being the contemporary heir of that posture. It is a way of de-ideologizing the narrative, or more correctly to rid it of its traditional ideological home in Social Democracy. Evoking the cultural memory in this way is to evoke its meaning of capability to govern, of acting politically responsible and of working to find practical solutions to problematic situations.

This is rhetoric far from the traditional right-wing rhetoric in Swedish political history, which also Reinfeldt alludes to in the quote. This has been the main strategy of the New Moderates: to claim the aura of capability to govern from the Social Democrats and do so through claiming central narratives, motifs and even direct concepts from them. Concepts that through the meaning creation of the cultural memory signal a general and caring responsibility.

Folkhem is one of them. Reinfeldt has manifestly used it sparingly, more as a silent evoked metaphor. But when a suicide bomber detonated himself in the middle of Stockholm 11 December 2010, Reinfeldt as Prime Minister took upon him to act as the father of the nation through explicitly using the traditional code word for this. He commented:

“A suicide bomber steps into the Swedish *Folkhem* and that is what he challenges. Freedom and openness that is what he hates.” (*Svenska Dagbladet* 2012-12-20, my translation).

In conclusion, also in the rhetoric of the New Moderates there is this split between political rhetoric and political reality and the evoking of the cultural memory as a way of overbridging it.

The cultural memory is used as rhetorical strategy to maximize votes. You touch on something central in the Swedish self-identity by connecting yourself to it. It also shows how neoliberal adjustments are hard to detect hidden behind the legacy of the memory, which in its turn points to its adaptability. The New Moderates have defined the traditional welfare state very much in narrow economic terms, as economic stability, and thereafter constructing themselves as the representatives of this stability.

C. THE SWEDEN DEMOCRATS

For the Sweden Democrats, a populist xenophobic far-right party, the manifest use of the *Folkhem*-metaphor has been central, claiming that the demise of the welfare state is the result of excessive immigration.

The party has its roots in neo-Nazi circles, but has undergone a very conscious gradual transformation in trying to become a respectable party (Ekman & Poohl 2010). This has been successful to the point where they in the election of 2010 gained entry to the Swedish parliament by getting 5,7 percent of the votes.

In many senses the Sweden Democrats are similar to other European populist right-wing parties, but they differ in being critical of neoliberalism and attaching themselves to the traditional Swedish social welfare ideology (Ekman & Poohl 2010: 281–284). In their rhetoric they strongly claim to be the only remaining representatives of the Swedish *Folkhem*.

Through this they identify themselves as in opposition to all the other parties who have betrayed the legacy, and they make them responsible for what they argue are the reason for the demise of the welfare state: the (muslim) immigrants, the, to speak with Žižek, sublime object of the ideology of the Sweden Democrats (Žižek 1989).

Much can be said of their ideology and how they use the cultural memory of the traditional welfare state, but one important aspect is that it contains the possibility for this meaning. As well as being a progressive, modern concept, the *Folkhem*-metaphor has from the beginning contained a strong conservative possibility – both regarding people and home – and for a long time, in part due to the demographics of Sweden, it was a mono-cultural project. This is what the Sweden De-

mocrats seize upon. They represent the only remaining link to what once was and to what was a good society, now disappeared in degeneration and multiculturalism.

In their principal program of 2011 they start out with providing this general outline of their policy:

“We affirm law and order, community-building traditions, social institutions and proven functioning natural communities in the form of family and nation. We seek a democratic, egalitarian and environmentally friendly society where all citizens are protected by, and equal before, the law. A society in which all citizens are also guaranteed a high basic level of economic and social security. We recognize that we, like all other human beings have inherent faults and do not think that a perfect, utopian society is achievable. By basing our policies on the above strivings, and by combining freedom and security, individualism and community, we hope to be able to create a welfare state that as much as possible is characterized by security, prosperity, democracy and a strong internal solidarity.” (Sverigedemokraterna 2011: 3, my translation).

The quote speaks of the party’s strong conservative leanings with its focus on nation and family as well as showing xenophobic tendencies in pointing out *internal* security. But there is also this rather vague, but still present aura of evoking the cultural memory of the traditional Swedish welfare state with its nationalist leanings. Nation, society and welfare become interconnected. There is also the characteristic presence of a threat here – but only implicitly through speaking of the protection of the law and the recurring theme of security.

Having stated this foundation, the Sweden Democrats become much more explicit further on in the pro-

gram, even though being careful not to step outside of the boundaries of recognized and traditional language and logic. They place their roots deep in Swedish modern history and as the real ideology representing the welfare state project. They argue:

“Several decades before Per-Albin Hansson gave his famous folkhem-speech, Swedish, social conservative debaters had formulated ideas of a welfare state and launched the concept of the folkhem.” (Sverigedemokraterna 2011: 9, my translation).

Factually, they are, as said in the above, right in this case. The Folkhem-metaphor was appropriated by Per-Albin Hansson and the Social Democrats from conservative circles. But that is not the main rhetorical function here; it is rather what is created through this. The Sweden Democrats try to re-appropriate the history and foremost the *memory* of this history. So while the Social Democrats try to connect the narrative to ideology and political visions and the New Moderates attempts to connect it with pragmatism and capability to govern, the Sweden Democrats claim to be the only ones knowing the real meaning, being the only ones capable of interpreting in the right way. In the above quote it is exemplified in an traditional ideological sense, but it also sets the stage for what is the main node of the policy of the Sweden Democrats: the threat to welfare that immigration represents. The principal program states this clearly:

“To in the long term safeguard the folkhem-idea and the welfare state, national cohesion must also be preserved. There must be a common identity as a foundation if those who have more should be prepared to share it with those who have less. For this reason, there is also an inherent contradiction between wel-

fare and multiculturalism.” (Sverigedemokraterna 2011: 26–27, my translation).

The central idea the rhetoric of the Sweden Democrats can be found in the last sentence of this quote. If we want to maintain the traditional welfare state, we must do away with multiculturalism. That is the only way to safeguard the idea of the *Folkhem*. In this they again create the rhetorical situation where they become the sole contemporary heirs to the traditional Swedish welfare state project, the only ones understanding its Swedishness.

This historical project is not solely under threat from immigration *per se*, but from what they understand as multicultural ideology, which they understand as impossible to combine with the real identity of the Swedish *Folkhem*. Through this they evoke the cultural memory by tying it to another historical situation, though not defined by being another historical situation as such, but defined as being a more monocultural situation. In this they combine the nationalism of Swedish modernity present in both the rhetoric of Social Democrats and the New Moderates, with an older more traditional ethnic and excluding nationalism.

In conclusion, the Sweden Democrats use the cultural memory of the traditional welfare state as nostalgia, as an at the same time accusing and comforting nostalgia. The real legacy of the memory can only be understood if understood as under threat and with the Sweden Democrats as the only saviours. Thereby they position themselves as not only the only ones able to save and protect the nation, but the only ones able to save and protect the memory of what the nation is. The nostalgia is therefore a deeply nationalistic and excluding nostalgia.

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

What to say then about cultural memory as a political instrument and battleground? One suggestion is that the use of the traditional welfare state as a cultural memory represents the longing for stability in uncertain times, the longing for believing in the possibility of politics. It is a way of blocking out the harsh reality of the absolute global rule of a visionless neo-liberal market economy.

The self-understanding of Sweden as a traditional welfare society needs to remain intact, and the political rhetoric needs to adjust itself to this self-understanding while at the same time politics seemingly has no chance to maintain or re-realize it on the level of reality. This point to the rift between the ideology of visions and the ideology of practical actions and politicians being totally unfazed, or even content with, politics being saying one thing and doing the opposite.

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