



Two John Eri(c)(k)ssons Make One Anthropologist

Williams Arens | Professor of Cultural Anthropology, Stony Brook University

New Yorkers Beware!

After eating alone at a restaurant in Göteborg, Sweden, on my first visit, I asked the waiter if service was included in the bill. He replied in perfect English “yes, but not the tip”. Perplexed by a response which might be taken for humor in some other country, I dutifully added something extra to an unknown amount already included on the tab.

This common enough muddled encounter for travelers quickly taught me that although much is mandated by the Swedish state, there is still a strong sense of personal responsibility mandated by conscience. Taken together these can constitute a heavy burden for the natives. I later learned that the tip is always a few extra krona (Swedish currency) in cash, and that eating alone in public is shameful.

The restaurant encounter took place close to where I was staying in Göteborg as the 20th century drew to a close. Even closer, on the city’s main street, stood an ignored granite statue of John Eriksson, one of the city’s adopted Swedish sons. Oddly enough, about equally distant from the house in which I grew up in mid-20th century America, there is another statue in honor of the same John Ericsson, who I assumed was an adopted son of Brooklyn. The Swedish version of a mature and pensive Eriksson looms over the city’s main thoroughfare as he reflects on a document. In the New World, he is an iron-cast young man straining on cables in a symbolic effort to hold the American Union together during the U.S Civil War. Ericsson’s now eternal labor resulted in the construction of his innovation, the iron-clad warship *Monitor*, which he completed as a U.S. resident. Reflecting a new spirit and era, in the late 19th century the name of my street in Brooklyn was changed from King William to Monitor Street in memory of Ericsson’s achievement. Until recently, although a frequent passerby, I took no notice of the serenity of the Eriksson there in Göteborg, nor for decades gave any thought to the hyperactive one in Brooklyn. Now these contrasting images are constant reminders of my life.

Initially the Brooklyn Ericsson had more practical than symbolic value. We locals were encouraged to park ourselves there and reflect on this rare bit of cultivated nature represented by that single statue, the only one for miles except for the saints guarding the surrounding churches. However, as small children we made use of John Ericsson by climbing onto and scrambling around his metal body. With added inches, we played basketball using one of

Ericsson's oddly angled hooked arms as the hoop. As teenagers, when the park attendants and adults had left, we learned to smoke cigarettes and drink beer in his company. It was also with Ericsson's encouragement that I first talked to the then 14-year-old who was to be my wife. A few years later, together on one of our first dates, we ventured across the river to "the city", to see Bergman's "Wild Strawberries".

In time, the space between two Eri(c)(k)ssons was joined by other admired Swedish images in cinema, sports, academia, and politics. As friends in my multi-ethnic boyhood community eventually announced and took pride in their Irish-, Italian- or Polish- ness, for some strange reason I became a secret Swedophile. As I recall them, these images now reappear to me as signposts in an unlikely trek from the streets of Brooklyn to the *gator* (streets) of Göteborg. Voyages begin long before we are aware of or have embarked on them.

Prefigured or not, I first found myself in Sweden as a visiting lecturer at the University of Göteborg on a typical cold and damp spring day in 1983. Despite my unusual interest in the place and being relatively well-traveled, it was a first. In fact, I had never even met anyone who admitted to being Swedish-American. I assumed they must all be tucked away in Minnesota. However, the first Swede I met, invited me to lecture at his university in the country's second-largest city. I had never heard of Göteborg before, and when there, learned that I could not pronounce its name. All I had to fall back on was a memory of a statue in my old neighborhood.

My first impressions of Sweden were pleasant but unsettling. Instead of a different place, I experienced a different time, filled with vivid images from my youth. Most of the people were white, neatly dressed, and reserved, at least on weekdays. The streets were clean, and what we called trolley cars still ran along the main thoroughfares. Even the parks seemed useless, and on the weekends, gas-guzzling, fish-tailed American cars from the 1950s cruised the streets. I also had the impression that the real city must lie somewhere across the river, separating glamor from the everyday. That was not the case, but I was back not only in space but also in time, to Brooklyn and the American Golden Age. The experience was surreal, but nonetheless comforting. Even more eerily, I eventually noticed that John Eriksson, older and wiser, was still eyeing me.

Trying to make sense of this reestablished order, I started the journey again – but this time in reverse, from Göteborg to Brooklyn via the printed word. The literary journey was not what I had expected. I assumed that an actually prosperous, peace-loving democracy would be admired, particularly by those from countries such as my own, which proclaimed these virtues but fell short of the mark in practice. However, I soon learned that for one reason or another the over-whelming majority of those who came before me did not share this view.

In the 17th, but also mostly in the 18th and 19th centuries, visitors to this land were mildly perplexed – particularly as to how the locals related to the universal dichotomy between nature and culture in this "land of flint". Most would conclude that the natives had somehow managed to get things upside-down as they placed greater value on what was provided for them by nature than by the culture they had created. The forests were cathedrals and the trees statuary.

As a consequence of this unsettling oddity, Sweden was not the most popular destination for those seeking cultural enlightenment. One typically jaded 19th century visitor would eventually sum up the Swedish experience when he sniffed: "It is worthwhile to see the North but not until one has done the South". Although there are allusions to Scandinavia in the classical and medieval texts, calling attention to a land of tall men and long ships, the

first full-scale literary account of Sweden by a foreigner does not appear until 1561. This book was also an almost entirely plagiarized account of Swedish history by the Englishman Sir George North, who arrived to negotiate a possible royal marriage between Elizabeth I and the Swedish Crown Prince. His *The Description of Sweden, Gotland, and Finland* (North, 1945 [1561]) was taken almost entirely from an existing manuscript penned earlier in Latin by a more scholarly native. Although “borrowing” is common practice among travel writers then and now, North took few pains to disguise his rendition of Swedish history. He merely added some rude remarks about the neighboring “horrible” monarch of Denmark, with an equally kind characterization of the local “prudent” Gustave, a descendent of Noah himself.

The Cromwellian Lieutenant Bulstrode Whitelocke’s two volume *A Journal of the Swedish Embassy in the Years 1653 and 1654* (Whitelocke 1855) is no more enlightening, unless one is interested in the quality of the local roast beef. In the 18th century there appear recorded “scampers and jaunts” left behind by English scribblers primarily interested in a primitive Nordic experience of wine, women, and song, as the Continent was closed off to them by the Napoleonic Wars. One such character by the name of Drevon pontificates in *A Journey through Sweden* that as it “consists entirely of one continued rock of granite, covered in different places with a greater or lesser quantity of earth ... it is not likely to become the residence of strangers, or, indeed, to be often visited by strangers”. Drevon was impressed only by the women he encountered, who were “more inclined to the desires of love than the tenderness thereof” (Drevon 1789: 94). Another in his wake, John Robinson, similarly impressed with the sights, mentions in *An Account of Sweden*, “The Women, while young, have generally fair Complexions, tolerable Features, and good Shapes, and some of them are accounted more eminent for Chastity before Marriage, than Fidelity after ...” (Robinson 1694: 76). Later, in the same vein, Nathaniel Wraxall’s *A Tour of Some of the Northern Parts of Europe* took “enchanted” note of “a number of pretty forms among the women... and I must own that I distributed my shillings more in proportion to their beauty than their age, infirmities, or poverty ...” (Wraxall 1776: 60). Together these accounts initiated a stereotypical vision of Sweden as a frigid natural landscape with a warmer feminine climate. This perception persists to this day, to the dismay of many contemporary female natives.

The first serious account of Sweden from a different gender perspective appears in the late 18th century, with the arrival of Mary Wollstonecraft’s long, agonized 1796 Letters to her lover in Paris (Wollstonecraft 1796). An early feminist and single parent, she brought her baby and a servant with her on her journey. Yet she also had some age-old problems. Her lover, who had suggested she take the journey, immediately moved in with his new attraction in the Paris she had just vacated. These personal concerns cast troubled emotional clouds over her visit to the “land of flint,” so unlike the more “polished” parts of Europe. In the typical fashion of a certain class of English person, Wollstonecraft preferred her animals over the mantel, and rose bushes where trees once swayed. Nature had to be subdued, particularly for the Swedish women, who conveyed a “total want of chastity similar to that in America” (Poston 1976). Although Wollstonecraft and others had managed to put their collective finger on something significant, they did not grasp that the issue was the unaccustomed inverted nature/culture divide.

For Sweden, then and now, as usual, males are the dominant sex. However, in this exceptional instance, males are associated with nature rather than culture. Females as usual are the subaltern sex, but associated with the culture which takes a back seat to nature in Sweden. This unusual – if not unique – framework, which combines the expected (male

dominance) with the unexpected (males' association with nature rather than culture) confounded visitors. The evidence for this odd arrangement is derived from everyday behavior, the very stuff of cultural anthropology.

The natives often told me: "There is no such thing as bad weather, just bad clothes", suggesting that nature is never the problem.¹ I was reminded of this insight as males in particular remained unperturbed in conversation in a downpour, or more amazingly as mounds of snow gently gathered on their heads. The situation could have been resolved easily with a hat, but to the native there is no situation.

Swedes are suspect WASPS when it comes to the P for Protestantism. The first Swedish bishopric was not established until the mid-12th century, over a thousand years after Christianity had taken root in parts of Africa and Asia and centuries after its spread to other parts of Europe. The faith's belated appearance, and the time it took to spread throughout the rural landscape have implications for today. Although early on the Swedes and other Scandinavians had an otherworldly religion, this perspective did not deny the relevance of the here and now, in contrast to the Christian emphasis on the hereafter. Reflecting this deep-seated perspective, on the Sabbath native parents prefer to take their children into the forest to forage for edibles rather than indoors for food for thought to nourish the soul.

With the arrival of summer, Swedes gather around a tree to celebrate the sun; later in the year, they come together again on the darkest day to recognize the return of the sun. These occasions are not outmoded folk traditions. They are, in a term usually reserved for techno-primitive societies, expressions of "animism". This term does not simply imply the worship of rocks, trees, or waterfalls. That sort of characterization is a serious misinterpretation that reduces a complicated concept to a simple label. In its basic and original sense, animism means aliveness, connoting a spiritual existence of things in the natural environment worthy of human reverence. This perspective does not deny the existence of a Creator, or a God. Thus the Swedish belief in animism is not incompatible with any of the world's major religions, nor indeed all religions. As in most other instances, the prevailing cultural situation is a matter of emphasis, not absolute difference in the sense of the presence or absence of a phenomenon.

As a result of a natural inclination and environmental protection legislation, Sweden from the air is a vast forest with minimal clearings indicating human activity. The very opposite picture emerges over non-Scandinavian Europe, where the land is comprised of large cultivated areas with small spaces remaining for a few trees in a prison of the human community. In animist Sweden, nature surrounds and dominates society. The opposite situation prevails in other parts of Europe, as human society dominates and encapsulates nature. It is not enough to say, as even the natives are prone to do, that Swedes respect nature more than most, and leave it at that. The relationship between humanity and nature is more profound than one of respect. The depth and meaning of the perspective are hinted at by certain seemingly inconsequential features of Swedish belief and behavior, such as the strange notion that there is no such thing as bad weather.

Although changing with globalization, the Swedes' continued resort to pre-Christian first names for males, such as Bjorn (bear) and Ulf (wolf) is instructive. These creatures still roam the Swedish countryside exemplifying a totemic relationship characterized by a respectful avoidance. The Swedish usage of these names is not fanciful, as in other lands where Leo inhabits a distant, if not mythical, land or domestic prison. Although nature names are

¹ "Det finns inget dåligt väder, bara dåliga kläder" which rhymes in Swedish (ed. note).

common in other places, they are usually attached to females, as in Rose or Robin, rather than males. This difference supports my hypothesis of a dominant male association with nature, also expressed by a similar preference for nature over culture for Swedish last names.

Anderson is to Sweden as Smith is to England. Both are common names in their respective lands, but the similarity ends there as these designators go off in dramatically different directions. The English usage refers to an occupation crucial to the development of European culture and society. Other popular names, such as Carter, Carpenter, Gardner or Farmer further signify the dominance of culture over nature. In contrast, in Sweden Anderson, the son of Anders, signifies a natural rather than a cultural identity. One third of all Swedish names fall into this naturalistic patronymic category. The remaining ones, such as Berg (mountain), Strom (stream), Lind (tree), Dhal (valley), or Falcon (falcon), all refer to the natural world. An extensive list of Swedish last names does not include a single one referring to culture.

Vulgarity – or rather the impossibility of resorting to it – in Swedish is an even more profound indication of a different perspective on nature. Most European languages resort to nature for a source of blasphemy or vulgarity. This linguistic strategy takes three basic tracks in order of increasing seriousness. The first is using crude words for biological functions, such as “shit”, and the second is bringing together nature and culture in inappropriate ways, such as in “Holy shit”. The third category is more complex; its mildest sub-form involves using the name of an animal for a person, e.g., “ass” or “bitch”, and in its most profane form the ingenious resort to animal names for the human anatomy, the “c...” words, rooster for male and rabbit for female genitalia.

In American or English films these words and phrases are commonplace, resulting in translation problems for Swedish. Referring to nature or natural acts to express anger or to insult others is impossible in Swedish. Thus, a film character’s lengthy string of invectives, calling attention to dubious parentage, oral sexual perversions, and sex with one’s mother, is incredibly, usually translated as, *jävlar*, i.e., devil. This one word – practically a term of endearment in English – is the worst thing one can call another human being in Swedish. The inability to use nature to insult is a profound feature of Swedish “culture”, particularly as it is related to English and other Germanic languages, where a crude resort to nature in speech is an art form akin to poetry. This differing evaluation of nature and culture in Sweden is best appreciated through personal experience.

For the average American, including this one, an anxious awareness of another culture is apparent when in a nightmare reversal, the natives appear not to be wearing sufficient clothing, or worse, none. That experience is common in Sweden at beaches or the elaborate public *Sim Hallen*, where in addition to the pool there are changing rooms, showers, and saunas, so a certain amount of undress (or no dress) is encountered. Nature shock can be experienced only on a cultural occasion. For me it was at the opera house with female colleagues for a contemporary adaption of *Don Giovanni*. At one point the hero appeared on center stage in the spa of his country villa sporting only a skimpy towel, and launched into his aria. In seconds the towel was gone. The Don, now *naked*, visibly strained on, devoid of all culture. In the background there was a red Jacuzzi, and in another minute, he was in the tub. However, his respite and mine was short-lived. He was shortly out again, now wearing only bubbles, and continued his lament. The aria eventually came to an end to polite applause. This scenario certainly does not represent “culture shock”.

In one of my last visits to Sweden, I was considering these matters while at a colleague’s

Nursing School graduation. In the midst of a successful career as a social anthropologist, she decided it was time to do something useful with her life. Remaining the useless anthropologist, I noticed that many of those around me were holding flowers. Thinking I had figured out what was going on, I quickly left the building and returned with my own bouquet. At the end of the ceremony, I confidently handed it over to my colleague, but only then noticed that my *blommor* (flowers) were the only ones still wrapped in paper. All the other gift-givers had removed that insignificant bit of culture, so that the celebrant received – only – nature.

Culture, or the lack of it, would not be the concern of 20th century visitors to Sweden, who would fixate and fulminate on the country's unsettling social arrangements and accompanying "mood". By this time, Sweden had emerged as a peaceful, industrial democracy enjoying one of the world's highest standards of living and all that goes with this presumably admirable condition. Internally it had achieved something close to income and gender equality. It had stayed out of the conflicts that had wracked, and were still wrecking, most of the world. Instead of war and empire-building, it had obliged itself by law to share a portion of its wealth with less advanced nations with non-military assistance. Importantly, studies of "happiness" and other data-driven satisfaction studies indicated that the residents were pleased with their lot. In direct contrast, outsiders with no need for data assumed that the natives were morose and in despair.

This negative attitude reached critical mass during the Cold War era, when and where Sweden became more of an idea than a place that outsiders had a vested interest in defining. Traveling to and through Sweden came to a halt as commentators simply appeared on the scene signifying the analytical purpose of their task. Moreover, as the traveler was stationary, the country was moving. In extraordinary fashion, some visitors rearranged the cognitive map by relocating Sweden from the Northern Hemisphere, where it had been in early times, to the more suspect "East". Indicating the new world order, Americans appeared on the scene to take part in re-orienting Sweden.

Positions hardened on the issue of Communism versus Capitalism. Few had the capacity to imagine an economic and political "middle way" characterized by neutrality and democracy. Sympathetic portraits such as the one that appeared in *The New Yorker* (Heller Feb. 16, 2015) were rare. Moderate voices were soon lost in the rush for a more simplistic understanding of "the Swedish enigma", identified by outsiders as the dismal experience of living in a beneficent society. For the majority of American commentators in particular, the country was an exasperating anomaly beset by moral issues, all having to do with *Socialism, Suicide, and Sex*.

No longer off the beaten path for a nature holiday, Sweden was now on the European fringe offering an alternative model for everyday existence, a "Brave New World", as one visiting commentator ominously put it in 1972 in *The New Totalitarians* (Huntford 1972). The idea of a "national character" enters the lexicon indicating the American preference for conceiving of a nation or a culture as a single giant personality easily understood in psychological terms. These "studies of the enemy" comprised a genre honed during the Second World War by American social scientists at the behest of the U.S. government.

During those post-war years, the most infamous off-handed characterization of Sweden and its presumed problems was pronounced by the avuncular U.S. President, Dwight Eisenhower. In the late 1950s, during an early debate about universal health care for its citizens, "Ike" drew attention to "a certain Scandinavian country" which he said had the world's highest suicide rates, mainly as the result of easily available health care and other

social services that minimized individual responsibility. Although higher than that of the U. S. at the time (but not now), Sweden did not have a high suicide rate compared to the rest of the industrialized world; it was similar to Switzerland's. According to "Ike", "socialized medicine", which he and other politicians had already secured for themselves as American public servants, would sap the will of the remainder of Americans as they struggled to survive in a competitive social environment. This stereotypical image of Swedes constantly on the verge of suicide was firmly set in the American public's imagination and remains there to this day, over a half-century later. The suspected abundance of sexual activity in Sweden, which at the time was as scarce in the U.S. as health care, was also a matter of concern.

Illustrating this deplorable situation, a 1955 article in *Time* magazine reported that a Swedish official believed that sex was "natural" even for the unmarried young, so that education on the subject was prudent social policy. The essay continued that sociology had become "a religion itself" in Sweden, and proclaimed the results were as expected – sexual promiscuity, birth control, illegitimate babies, and unwed mothers who "are practically heroines". Worst of all there were abortions for those who decided not to opt for heroine status. A fact-filled response to this depiction of Swedish immorality in a letter by the Swedish Ambassador in a subsequent issue had little effect. It was now sex and suicide, and somehow, they were connected.

Raising the temperature even further, the more conservative Catholic *Commonweal* magazine declared that the Swedes suffered from the usual "melancholy; a sort of spiritual deficiency-disease, a polite desperation" or "dullness". Another commentator during this era declared that Sweden is "not quite the West", for "the Scandinavia peninsula is more like "an extension of Siberia". A presumed suppression of individuality in favor of the collective, an inordinate respect for authority, an overbearing bureaucracy, and low church attendance – even less than that of the Soviet Union, exclaimed one horror-stricken Irish American writer – led to the obvious comparisons to Sweden's then Communist neighbor, the enemy of "the Free World". Others drew attention to superficial correspondences between Sweden and Japan – the previously inscrutable oriental enemy of the Western Democracies – having to do with social formality. Harking back to World War II propaganda, the Swedes were depicted in one account as "...masters of concealment and evasion".

These negative national character publications, at times funded by the C.I.A. through front organizations, chased Sweden through time and space to dislodge it from the Western World. The British author Paul Britten Austin as a "Writer in Residence" produced the best books on the country that was financially supporting him (Austin 1968 and 1970). After presenting an initial sympathetic image of the country, Austin proposes to decipher the Swedish personality by seeking out key cultural idioms. Apparently unaware that personality and culture are quite different abstract phenomena having no logical relationship to each other, Austin interprets what he considers to be familiar Swedish linguistic tropes. These include *längtan*, rendered in English as a self-satisfying longing for the unattainable; *stämning*, a feeling destroyed by attempts at verbal expression; *vemodsglad*, happy-sad; *ensamhet*, a sense of loneliness and isolation in the presence of others; and of course *lagom*, neither too little nor too much. He also refers to the slightly more up-beat but hardly uplifting concepts of *att trivas*, the almost unattainable ideal of spontaneous enjoyment, and *snäll*, good, kind, and well-behaved so as not to draw attention to oneself.

Without explanation, Austin seeks the inspiration for these themes in the isolation, inbreeding, and resulting homogeneity of Sweden, which inexplicably produced the "beautiful

Swedish blonde". He also reflects on the overbearing sense of nature, cold climate, and periods of darkness that engender a brooding soul. "Like the physical landscape", Austin writes, "the Swede's psychological landscape seems in the past to have been particularly static". On the other hand, he also concludes that Sweden's rapid achievement of modernity has resulted in a sense of personal alienation. For him there seems to be "no easy solution to the problem of being Swedish", as the natives engage in a paradoxically self-satisfying quest for the unattainable. For Austin, then, neither tradition, often seen as the saving grace of some societies, nor change, the savior for others, offers any respite for the Swedish character. Despite the absence of supporting data and in the face of contradictory evidence gathered in systematic fashion from the natives, indicating they would not recognize the image of themselves, Austin presents this negative and subjective portrait, as an objective account of another culture and people.

Others, such as Chris Mosey, another British resident journalist, echoed what was becoming a contemporary stereotype. In *Cruel Awakening*, he employs a similar strategy of feigned objectivity by first admitting that Swedish solutions to social problems still besetting other countries are impressive. He follows with the suggestion that these achievements have also produced an "impoverishment of the human spirit", and inexplicably proposes the assassination of former Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme, who was shot as he left a movie theater with his wife and son, as a meaningful metaphor for the failure of contemporary Swedish society (Mosey 1999). The American journalist David Jenkins, who visited and stayed in Sweden at the expense of an organization called "Meet Modern Sweden", considers the usual topics in the now-familiar initially balanced tone. His discussion also considers the country's "admirable" resolution to the social problems still plaguing other industrialized societies, but in *Sweden and the Price of Progress* (Jenkins 1969) concludes that it is a "boring place". Finally, another journalist invited by the Swedish Institute in Stockholm to present his views on the country, listed the usual admirable social achievements before referring to "the dark side" of the Swedish landscape as the result of "widespread individual unhappiness and dissatisfaction," and "despo-socialism". The Swedish for "no good deed goes unpunished" would be apt at this point, but if quoted, a commentator would likely consider it characteristic of the dark side of the Swedish personality.

The negativity did not ease up with the end of the Cold War, as Sweden's previous failings were replaced with contemporary ones. In what was intended to be an amusing account of the country that turns out to be laughable instead, P.J. O'Rourke takes some pleasure after a visit by noting in *Eat the Rich* that the Swedish experiment is now finally, finally, failing as the country vainly seeks "prosperity without capitalist chaos". O'Rourke's basic social indicator for this unhappy situation, which makes his New York City so much fun and Stockholm so dreary, is the number of "crazy people living on the streets" at home. For O'Rourke they could still make their appearance if Sweden would only get itself disorganized properly (O'Rourke 1998). This sketch is provided by a representative of the U.S. where at the present time twenty-two usually homeless veterans alone purposely end their lives on the street every day, in a country with the highest level of income inequality in the industrialized world and one with less social mobility than Sweden. On the most recent *Social Progress Index*, which provides objective measures of a country's ability to meet basic human needs, well-being, and opportunities, Sweden ranked number two in the world, and the U.S. an unfortunate sixteenth.

These examples show that a literary strategy concerned primarily with creating and

promoting a negative image of another society, has been effective, but as argued, it has employed a simplistic and illogical procedure. Based on this perspective, which prioritizes personality over the group, the admittedly admirable societal achievements of the Swedes must have been produced by a uniformly dismal populace on the verge of suicide. How this woeful group managed to produce an admirable social system agreeable to everyone but the critics, is not explained.

To make sense of Sweden these personal negatives must be dismissed as causal factors and substituted with positive social characteristics such as a sense of community and collective responsibility, a concern for social justice, conciliation, and consensus rather than confrontation. These communal inclinations were regularly commented on by 18th and 19th century visitors to the country, which strongly suggest that they were the cause for the emergence of the Swedish welfare state in the 20th century.

In light of so much negativity, Sweden has apparently had to pay a penalty for going first in adopting certain national policies. Indeed, being correct may be less forgivable than outright error and failure. An example of this view is provided by a reporter for the British *Spectator* who in the 1960s drew attention to the “rigidity” of Swedish society at the time in prohibiting smoking in elevators, public transport, phone booths, and department stores. Worse, this reporter suggested there was hypocrisy on gender issues, since in Sweden, in order to be considered equal to a man, a woman had to be both educated and employed – as if these were apparent feminine failings.

Sweden has not only experienced the problems of “going first” but has also had to bear the burden of being the messenger of woeful tidings. The country’s rapid modernization and early responses to the problems of this complex process have not always been well received by others. Traits that are inevitably and regrettably referred to in the U.S. as contributing to the “collapse” of the family and marriage and the deterioration of “family values” made their appearance early on in Sweden. But these phenomena are the eventual products of a post-industrial capitalist society, rather than of the Swedish social welfare state that has had to respond to them initially. As these issues have appeared in other countries, Sweden has often been held up as a negative societal example. Again in this instance there has been confusion over cause and effect in assuming that Swedish social policy has been the cause of these rearrangements, rather than the response to them.

My primary concern here is not so much an apologia for Sweden as an understanding of the context that has allowed for the negative image of that society. Sweden’s national defects in the past, include its 17th century colonial adventures in the New World, imperial expansionism into Eastern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, the eugenics movement, and cooperation with Nazi Germany in the 20th century. All of these historical events had a negative effect on other countries. Oddly enough, these episodes are never mentioned by outsiders; Sweden receives a pass. Instead the country is taken to task for taxing its citizens for health care and social equality, as if these were failings to be guarded against by other countries.

Postscript

As a matter of full disclosure for this positive estimation of the country, I should add here that for some years I received a large orange envelope from Sweden with the word PENSION prominently displayed on the cover in black ink. The numerous enclosed sheets of paper explained in various languages that I could request a pension payment. I assumed this was

because for several months, one year I had been officially on the payroll at the University of Göteborg as a Visiting Professor to chair some Ph.D. “disputations”.² The enclosure listed various amounts of Swedish *krona*, in boxes, that were clear enough. However, I could not figure out how often this amount would be paid over a year. Weekly seemed appealing. I eventually called Sweden and talked to someone in the pension office, who informed me in the usual perfect English and without a hint of humor – after a short pause to refer to her calculator – that the first figure in Swedish *krona* equaled about \$2.34, which could be paid to me on a monthly basis. The second figure, the annual amount in Swedish *krona*, totaled – after another pause – \$28.08. I was also informed that I could not receive these sums unless I lived in a country that had an agreement with Sweden for this purpose. The cost of the phone call was \$50.68. I should put the pension aside for tips.

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² Final examination and defence of the thesis (ed. note).