

The Sweden Democrats and the ethno-nationalist rhetoric of decay and betrayal

Abstract

Sweden was long considered an "exceptional case" with no representatives of the radical right in parliament. However, the Sweden Democrats (SD) entered parliament in the 2010 parliamentary election, pointing towards the demand for ethnic nationalism also in Sweden. This article explores the party's rhetoric with particular references to the politics of decay and betrayal and its construction of a Swedish golden age. The rhetoric of decay echoes the ethnicity-based nationalisms articulated in other parts of Europe alongside nationalist claims of homogenous origins, a common destiny and an inherited social solidarity. The empirical material consists of political election programs since 1989 (SD 1989), high profile speeches and the party journal (SD Kuriren).

Keywords: radical right-wing parties, ethnic nationalism, the Sweden Democrats.

THE RESURGENCE OF strong radical right-wing parties and movements constitutes one of the most significant political changes in democratic states during the past decades. Sweden was for a long time an exceptional case until the Sweden Democrats were elected to the Swedish parliament in 2010 with 5.7 percent of the vote. This share of votes was increased to 12.9 percent in the 2014 election. Today the support is hovering between 15 and 20 percent in the polls.

The radical right shares an emphasis on ethno-nationalism rooted in myths about history. Their programs are directed toward strengthening the nation by making it more ethnically homogeneous and – for most radical right-wing parties and movements – by returning to traditional values. The radical right also tends to accuse elites of putting internationalism and their special interests ahead of the nation and the interests of the people (Rydgren 2018). Overall, anti-immigration sentiments are the most critical reason as to why voters support the radical right. This is indicated by two anti-immigrant frames, instrumental for attracting voters to radical right-wing parties. The first frame depicts immigration as a threat to the ethno-national identity of the majority. The second depicts immigrants as a major cause of criminality and other kinds of social insecurity (Rydgren 2008). The perceived threat against national

identity taps into sentiments of nostalgia, the loss of times bygone – of “not feeling at home anymore” – and is translated into ethnic and national terms. This raises the question of how radical right-wing parties construct their ethno-nationalist message, an issue which we turn to in this short text taking Sweden as our case in point.

The Sweden Democrats offer an apocalyptic rhetoric inspired by the (reactionary) conservatism of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s and offers a rebranded version of the concept “Peoples Home” (Folkhemmet) along ethnic lines. A Swedish Golden Age, dated to the 1950s, is pitted against the decline of the past 50 years. The alleged decline is caused by the internationalisation promoted by the Social Democrats and the Liberals. Sweden of the 1950s is portrayed as a safe cohesive society with a homogeneous population – a symbol of traditional life. This image may attract voters with a conservative ethos. Yet, the Sweden Democrats show some signs of moderation, and of repackaging and rebranding their rhetorical message over time. For instance, the party is steering away from the nostalgia of the 1930s, an attachment notable with members of the early party formation. Moreover, approaching doom, decay, enemies and threats posed by immigration with more caution in official literature, has contributed to increasing the voter base. Having said this, however, when it comes to its core ethno-nationalist ideology the party shows considerable continuity, and it has ethnicised Swedish politics by merging the ideals of ethnic nationalism with Swedish democracy as it sets out to reconstruct a Swedish golden age in the future. We approach our case with the shifting rhetoric in mind.

The golden rule of ethno-national politics: the Swedish nation, its golden age and decline

Golden ages play a central role in nation-building and for the re-construction of nations as sources of political legitimacy, authority and authenticity (Elgenius 2011). Golden ages contribute towards claiming authenticity along the lines of historical continuity and ethnic homogeneity in times of untoward change, crisis, decay and decline. Thus, the rhetoric of decay help nationalists to construct a past of national grandeur suitable for serving the political project of the present. The discursive elements inherit in references to golden ages include the underlying assumption that the survival of the nation depends on moral guidance or ‘a return, at least in spirit, to these earlier ‘golden’ ages of the nation’s history’ (Smith 2009, 36). Few radical right-wing parties wish for an actual return to the periods they idealize (Rydgren 2018), but gain the direction for the political project by proposing to reconstruct the future. Ethno-nationalist claims are therefore closely associated with defining a national origin, a cultural heritage and significant national events that make sense of the nation as one continuous community of one homogenous people, despite the overwhelming evidence against such notions (Elgenius, 2015).

The decline of the Swedish nation is central to this form of ethno-nationalist politics (SD party programmes 1989 onwards) as is the end of the Swedish welfare state (SD Kuriren 2015). The decline of the Swedish Golden Age centres on recent periods of

the 1940s and 1950s as the beacon of Swedish democracy, socio-economic wellbeing and ethnic homogeneity and cohesion. The latter is directly linked to 'the absence of foreign ethnic minorities' (SD 1989) and the 'strongly negative impact' of immigration from 'remote cultures' (SD, 2011). The authenticity of the golden past is therefore portrayed as a continuous correlation between democratisation, ethnic homogeneity (SD 1989, 2011) and the 'extraordinary' Swedish socio-economic development pre-1960 (SD 1994).

The 1960s, however, marks the beginning of the end and decay:

Our national cohesion was undermined and the People's Home started to march towards a disunited and violent society. (SD 1994)

The People's Home (Folkhemmet, first used in 1928) may be described as a poetic term for the Swedish welfare state. In many ways a nationalist project, it acted on behalf of a discourse of 'us' and of social solidarity. Notably, it was first introduced with the social insurances in Germany in the middle of the 1800s but was later used for welfare initiatives in the 1900s with the so-called *Volksgemeinschaft*, associated with parties on opposing sides of the political spectrum.

The Sweden Democrats make central assumptions about the People's Home, outlined in early party programmes, and not only about its 'success story' but also its alleged close connections to Swedish democracy, Swedish nationalism and the Swedish people. Above all, it is brought forward as a time of consensus about who the people actually were (SD 2011, 2014). A suitable past is therefore identified: Sweden as the cradle of democracy and democracy a 'hallmark of Sweden' (SD 2011). The empirical evidence to sustain such argument span centuries, and point to the Swedes' democratic superiority, through the formation of early regional laws, the absence of serfdom (from 1350 onwards), the Acts of Freedom of Information (1776) as per the alleged 'inherited human essence' (SD 2011). The Swedes are in effect ethnically assigned a proneness to democracy and equality by the Sweden Democrats, in order to link ethnic homogeneity with Swedish democracy, the welfare state and the nation.

The Sweden Democrats argue that the 1940s and 1950s were characterised by national solidarity, but leftist forces undermined Swedish cohesion in the 1960s. The Swedish Democrats praise the early Social Democracy for the construction of the People's Home and the Swedish welfare state, but simultaneously blame the recent Social Democracy for undermining the harmonious welfare state from the 1960s onwards. Olof Palme, Swedish Prime Minister (1969–1976; 1982–1986) is identified as the primary villain and stands accused of 'rabid internationalisation' and 'senseless migration policies' (SD Kuriren 1994, no 23:8), allegedly to strengthen the Social Democrats at the ballots. The 'politically correct elite', socialists and liberals, are blamed for allowing non-European migration from 'ethnically distant or remote places' since the 1970s. The elite is accused of letting the nation down by embracing multicultural values and by promoting membership in the European Union, resulting in the loss of Swedish sovereignty.

The Sweden Democrats single out migration from non-European countries as the cause of moral decay and as especially harmful to Swedish cohesion resulting in 'high crime numbers, divorces and broken homes, abortions and low Swedish nativity'. The rhetoric of decay includes the undermining of a distinct Swedish culture, common cultural roots, collective memories and cultural homogeneity (e.g. 1994, 2011), claims central to justify current threats (primarily posed by non-European migration) to Swedish interests. However, although the inherited essence of Swedish identity and culture is advocated in the ethno-national terms of continuity and homogeneity, Swedish identity and culture is appearing with considerable complexity as simultaneously claimed to be part of the Nordic, European and Western culture (SD, e.g. 1996, 2011, 2014). Thus, the 'inherited essence' of Swedish identity and culture is also narrated as one of a mixed Western and European heritage – excluding the heritage of Eastern Europe but including the heritage of Western countries outside Europe – with the sole purpose of raising boundaries against non-European and Muslim countries.

The core of the rhetoric of doom and decay – as a result of denationalisation – exposes a likeness to the 'nationalistic principles' of a Herderian framework, in which nationals are said to have a right and duty to protect the nation's distinct culture and soul. Such arguments are bound up with Herder's cultural nationalism and speculations about the historical continuity of national cultures founded in a 'spiritual genesis'. This genesis is constituted by traditions, customs and cultural ways transmitted by language from older to younger generations, who have a right and duty to carry on the culture of their ancestors. Herder's emphasises the role of the national language as the chief medium of this historical transmission, through which the Volk or people's distinct and persistent identity is both awaken and maintained over time. According to Herder, some 'mutations' of original cultures and traditions take place along the way, as a result of reappraisal and revaluation and cultures, therefore, develop in different directions under different circumstances. Yet, this process of cultural transmission is considered an example of the 'continuous spiritual genesis' that relate 'the living with the dead and with those yet to come' (Herder in Barnard, 2003:121). In the recycled rhetoric of the 21st century this is translated into the following:

The national community binds members of the nation together over time and creates ties between dead, living and unborn generations and between young and old, different social classes, political fractions and geographical regions. (SD 2011, 2014)

The Sweden Democrats' rhetoric includes references to the distinct nature of the Swedish national culture too. From premises, not dissimilar to a Herderian framework developed in the 18th century, the Sweden Democrats have argued in terms of a Swedish soul (*folksjäl*, SD 1994, 96, 99) and a distinct Swedish culture (e.g. 1994, 2011, 2014). In doing so, they also pledge to revive and protect the nation as if to cure it from neglect.

For Herder, the process of nation formation is defined by its organic attributes such

as ‘the virtue’ of generational transmission (Barnard, 2003:121), an ethno-nationalist logic traceable in the Sweden Democrats’ rhetoric. The party may rhetorically have shifted towards the terminology of ‘open Swedish-ness’ (i.e., a person is considered Swedish if defined as such by self and others) (SD 2003, 2005) relatively recently, but its underlying justification echoes exclusive boundaries drawn on the grounds of ethnic nationality rather than political citizenship. That is, regardless of achieved citizenship, the biological retainer and cultural resonance of inherited nationality enables the exclusion of Swedish citizens from being perceived as authentically Swedish in terms of nationality. This rhetorical shift to ‘open Swedish-ness’ was supported by a discursive shift of party symbolism too, from a torch of Swedish colours (linked to neo-Fascism and racial nationalism, via the Italian MSI and the British National Front) to a blue anemone in 2006. However, the implications of the exclusive nature of ‘open Swedish-ness’ may be exemplified by the support for repatriation subsidies to immigrants who wish to ‘return to their homeland’ (former Party Secretary Björn Söder, DN, 2014). Kent Ekeröth, Member of Parliament, took such arguments further (at a demonstration against refugees in Southern Sweden in 2015) saying that immigration has been the ‘destruction’ of Sweden and declaring the audience ‘members of a resistance movement’ and ‘a spearhead’ ‘to take our country back’ (Expo, 2015). The latter echoes references to ‘suicide politics’ in the early party programmes (e.g. 1989), the doom of the ‘dying nation’, its ‘terrible plight’, the ‘dark future ahead’ due to immigration, internationalisation and ‘islamification’ of Sweden (SD Kuriren 2001 no 43; 1996 no 27; 2003 no 51). The unsavoury historic connotations have therefore not been altogether eliminated by the shift in framing, rhetoric and corresponding symbolism.

Conclusions and contradictions

The Sweden Democrats offer Swedish nationalism as a remedy to restore authenticity, (ethnic and cultural) homogeneity and social solidarity. The official path of Swedish nation- or state-building has been disregarded; probably because of the relative value in providing a golden age or identifying a decline. A useful past, in the context of this rhetoric, is a past against which the discourse of decline, crisis, untoward change and related enemies be clearly identified. The politics of decline is, therefore, less about the past than about the present.

A suitable Swedish Golden Age, in this context, is a rebranded version of the 1950s conceptualisation of the Swedish welfare state – the People’s Home – originally founded in civic terminology but unwittingly oozing of nationalism and organic solidarity. With the main aim to restrict immigration to Sweden, the Golden Age of the People’s Home provides a clear framework; its egalitarian proponents and a rebranded nationalist project along ethnic lines. Thus, the construction of a Swedish Golden Age has become straightforward as a discourse of deservedness and, ultimately, membership along the lines of ethnic homogeneity. Swedish authenticity is hereby positioned in the golden age of the 1950s, with the nostalgia for civic egalitarianism yet rhetorically rebranded ethnically as a period of pre-immigration.

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