"I BROUGHT A HAZELNUT FROM MACEDONIA"

Cultural and biological diversity in a globalizing world

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INTRODUCTION

This article deals with the cultural parallelism between biological and cultural diversity as manifested in allotment garden areas in Malmö. Applying an historical perspective, we argue that the mobility of species is almost as old as human history. Whenever new species are introduced, as when cultural traits meet, differences may be welcomed and introduced in the already existing context, just as they may be shunned, hated and persecuted. Introducing new species may be an efficient way of colonizing land, as shown by Alfred W. Crosby.[1] In an increasingly globalized world, people seem to bring with them their old plants, and they exchange varieties and species with each other. In a multicultural city like Malmö, this is practised among the many allotment gardeners from all over the world. Sometimes it enhances contact and integration, and sometimes cultural practices and species comes to symbolize difference, contact with the country of origin or even ethnic identity.

The article starts with a general overview of the history of migration and migrating species. Then we introduce the reader to the ideas of biological and cultural diversity and the discursive parallels between them. After that, we present some of our empirical data from interviews with allotment gardeners of different ethnic origin all over Malmö. Finally, we critically discuss how cultural and biological diversity as sometimes

different but sometimes closely connected sets of associations are used in official discourse on cultural and biological change.

Malmö has a long history of multiculturalism. Already in medieval times, Malmö was a dynamic centre of fishing and trade for people from all over the Baltic region. Germans, Poles, Danes and Swedes met and handled economic, religious and political matters on the sandy beach in the growing city. Today, Malmö is one of the most multicultural cities in Sweden, which can easily be observed in parks and allotment gardens, where people of different origins engage in leisure activities or in small-scale cultivation.

BACKGROUND: MOVING PEOPLE, MIGRATING SPECIES

Whenever people through history have travelled or moved, they have brought with them species of plants and animals from their original habitat. For example, agricultural expansion spread species like wheat, sheep and goats from the original area in "The Fertile Crescent" all over Western Europe. However, it has been debated whether groups of people moved with their habit of cultivating and their species, or if it was rather the agricultural *idea* that was spread. Agriculture has proven to be a very successful strategy from a human perspective. Agricultural species have been so closely connected to culture – in fact, *cultivare* means "to grow" in Latin. Societal systems often evolved around bulk species such as wheat, rice, maize, or, when it comes to animals, cattle, sheep, camels and goats.

During the European colonization of the "New World", the use of efficient large-scale agricultural systems, but mainly the bringing of expansive and fast-growing species, was part of the strategy of domination. This has been thoroughly elaborated by the environmental historian Alfred W. Crosby.[2] Wheat and cattle are among the most well-known. Crosby also discusses the fact that not only useful plants, but also weeds, forage plants and unintentional species like "wild oats, common foxtail, chess, bromes, Italian ryegrass"[3] as well as illnesses such as smallpox, were introduced with disastrous consequences in the new environment.

Cross-cultural contacts and global trade have simultaneously led to the movement of agricultural, horticultural and medical plants in all

directions over the globe, not only by Europeans or from Europe to other parts of the world. For example, the potato, originally a South and Central American tuber, was brought to Europe during the sixteenth century and eventually became a staple food in all Europe. Cassava was brought to Africa from South America. Tomatoes and tobacco were soon planted all over Europe. Coffee, originally an Ethiopian plant, was spread by Arab merchants to Northern Africa, and was later exported to Brazil and the West Indies.

In some cases, the new coming species went wild, such as the mustang that spread all over the north American continent, and the dromedaries that have colonized the Australian desert. These examples show that newcomers sometimes are able to adapt to new environments without causing damage. In other cases, the local ecosystems have been severely altered through the introduction of new animals, weeds and illnesses. One of the most well-known examples of this is the introduction of rabbits to Australia and New Zealand. Such cases have created the idea that all new species are *invasive species*, spreading uncontrolled and putting the ecosystem out of balance. Despite the fact that migration of species is a phenomenon as old as human history, it is still controversial.

DIVERSITY

Biological diversity is a concept with a long history, sliding between science and aesthetics or ideology. Originally, ecologists during the 1930s up till the 1950s discussed whether succession in an ecological system leads to a more efficient system in terms of handling energy. Later on, the idea of biological systems in equilibrium, balance, was introduced. It was suggested that a *mature* ecosystem reached a state of optimal functioning. In the 1980s a number of biologists found out that heavy exploitation of, for example, rain forests caused the extinction of many species, a fact that these more or less overtly "conservationist" biologists found alarming. To shed light on the issue of mass extinction and to make it acceptable to the scientific community, the problem, along with the concept of biological diversity, or *biodiversity*, was consciously launched at a conference held by the American Science Association in Washington 1986.[4] In that context, the concept came to mean *a value*

consisting of a diversity of species, making the habitat worthy of protection. The researchers put all their scientific credibility into the campaign, which was very successful. Biodiversity soon became a buzzword in conservationist debates all over the world, even though, or maybe because, the concept was laden with aesthetics and a basically radical idea about the value of protecting not only species as such, but also their biotopes. In 1992, Convention on Biological Diversity was signed by many countries at the UN Conference in Rio de Janeiro and thus the concept took a great leap into established politics.

But biodiversity was, and still is, a contested concept. It is formally said to denote diversity on three levels: landscape, population and individually. Among some biologists, it is used as a neutral term, simply equalling the fact that there is diversity on these three levels. Among others scientists, as among some conservationist activists fighting to save forests or other biotopes from exploitation, the concept is used to denote a high level of "integrity" or "untouchedness".[5] In this sense of the word, a city dump where a grand variety of seeds sprout, a zoological garden with animals from all over the world or a park with hundreds of tree species do *not* represent biological diversity, regardless of the variation to be found there. The term is then set aside primarily for what is sometimes called "virgin" ecosystems.

On the other hand, biotopes that have been influenced by humans for decades or millennia may contain great biological variation, sometimes directly as a result of human activity. In Northern Europe, meadows that have been cleared, grazed, cropped or otherwise harvested since prehistoric times may be extremely rich in species, and only a few years without tending will wipe out living conditions for species that are susceptible to overgrowth or need trampling to grow. Extensive land use systems such as Amazonian slash-and-burn cultivation also sometimes enhance species diversity. Among many scientists and conservationists, though, this kind of man-made diversity is valuable and deserves protection too.

Thus, biological diversity may be perceived as a value to be found in a natural setting, untouched by human hand. Or it may be said to exist where humans have been influencing their environment for a long time in what is thought to be a benign way. To put it very bluntly: Biological diversity is more or less unconsciously associated with an older order, with premodern circumstances.[6]

Metaphorically, aesthetically and ideologically, diversity can be said to be a reaction to the order, monoculture and efficiency of modern

society.[7] In conservationist issues, it is not human activity as such that is opposed to biological diversity, but modern practices. Modern forestry as well as modern agriculture during the 1900s was very much focused on techniques to achieve unity, not to say uniformity, which was thought to improve productivity. Not only clear-cutting, large-scale monocultures and new, modern varieties of crops, were introduced to improve productivity, but older habits and local varieties were politically opposed as being old-fashioned and anti-development. The use of pesticides and herbicides was another expression of this urge and industrial development.

Also in political issues dealing with cultural and ethnic identities, modern society has up until today focused on unity, not to say uniformity.[8] A modern nation state, like Sweden, strove to eradicate the cultural differences between newcomers, immigrants and ethnic minorities. The political goal was *assimilation*, or, in an American context, a melting pot, where differences were thought to blend and eventually disappear. Then, in the late 1980s, a critique against this ideal started to grow in the USA. Cultural diversity, a multitude of ethnic identities, little by little took over as a political ideal and changed the way society looks upon and handles cultural differences. What was formerly thought to be a threat or simply a disturbing variation is today a goal. Just like "biological diversity", "cultural diversity" forms a conceptual frame that is so general that it can easily be accepted by society, though it is inherently full of contradictions and conflicting interests.[9] Both phenomena – or ideals – are today held up as the basis for sustainable development (another politicized and deeply contested concept). In a postmodern society, diversity is "all things good", an ideal that cannot be questioned.

A city like Malmö, with one of the highest immigrant rates in Sweden, asserts the values of being a "multicultural city". This is true, but it is also a poorly integrated city. Political conflict and poverty have made a great number of people move to Sweden during the last twenty years. Some of them, mainly elderly people, have taken up gardening in one of the many allotment garden areas in and around Malmö. There, people from all over the world actually form a cultural diversity, meeting (but not always mixing) practices, habits, tips and sometimes, exchanging species with their neighbours.

BIOLOGICAL AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN MALMÖ ALLOTMENT GARDENS

Sometimes cultural diversity contributes directly to biological diversity, in one of the denotations of the concept, i.e. a diversity of species. In our present research project on the outdoor recreation habits of immigrants in Malmö, we have conducted interviews with people of immigrant origin in different settings. It is often presumed that immigrants only want to barbecue and picnic in parks and on beaches as their main outdoor recreation activity. This seems to be true to some extent, but in the numerous allotment garden areas in and around the city, we have noticed that many immigrants take great interest in cultivating vegetables and flowers.[10] The focus in these popular publications is on the variety of introduced exotic species, originating in the cultivators' home countries and replanted in a Swedish setting.

Our method when mapping this field was very simple: We approached cultivators and asked them about their allotment gardens, what species they grew and how they used them. If the communication turned out well, we went on to ask the gardener about his/her origin and gardening habits. One of us asked the questions, the other one took notes. Often, but not always, gardeners told us facts about their situation, family and traditions. A majority of our informants were of Middle Eastern or Eastern European origin, of both sexes, most of them in their fifties and sixties. In this context, we will denote them "Greek man" or "woman from Palestine" even if they may have been Swedish citizens for a long time.

Our impression is that the majority of the gardeners use their allotments as was originally intended by the founders: partly for recreation and partly as a means to improve the household economy and the nutrition status of the family. A majority of the older gardeners told us that they gave their surplus away to children and grandchildren, and even that they "had to" grow a lot of vegetables to feed a big family and to be able to cook the food that they were used to.

Some gardeners informed us about the traditional use of each plant. A man of Iraqi origin in his forties showed his coriander bed and made a circulating gesture over his chest: "Coriander. It is good for the blood." Utility was sometimes of a more abstract character: One Polish woman in her sixties grew almost only flowers because they "made her relax". Among some gardeners, surplus produce could be sold, more or less informally, some just discretely handing out small plastic bags with

spices in exchange for money, while someone else had set up an proper booth with a roof, flags and a counter.

Karine Mannerfelt has drawn attention to a number of rare and exotic species from a Swedish point of view.[11] In the Malmö setting, we discerned in the immigrants' gardens some common species that are traditionally grown in Swedish kitchen gardens, such as potatoes, onions, beans, lettuce, rhubarb, celery, kale, parsley, red radish, black radish and tomatoes. Some species, though, have been introduced or reintroduced to Swedish gardens during the last few decades, such as squash, white radish, white-beet, garlic, mint and coriander. One informant gave proof of the changing variety of seeds that can be found in Swedish garden shops: "When we got here [to Sweden], it was hard to find seeds and plants. Nowadays, you can get anything everywhere" (Greek man, about 70 years old). Globalization, thus, is manifest in the assortment of market gardens. Other varieties are still hard to find, and informants testify to bringing them or getting them from relatives abroad, or letting some of the crop set seeds. Newer and definitely more exotic species like fenugreek; new forms of garden cress, rocket, aubergine, black-eyed beans and leek were also identified. Some species that are perceived as weeds in Sweden and normally not eaten, such as common sorrel, are grown.

We expected to find that the composition of species grown in each garden would be very different from one garden to the other. Some gardeners actually presented their combination of plants as culturally specific. A Greek man, about 70 years old, told us: "Arabs have their species, and we have ours. We grow things as we did in our own countries." But when interviewing his Arab allotment neighbours and observing their gardens, we were able to establish that they grew almost the same species all over the area, with some minor variations. Our impression is that plants seem to be important for identity construction in relation to an imagined "Other". In practice, there seems to be, for example, a "Mediterranean" kitchen garden with minor variations, and we observed that gardeners from East European countries grew plants that more resembled old traditional Swedish gardens with a variety of kale, peas and tubers.

To some informants, it was important to show us plants that had been brought or sent from their home country. A lady in her sixties from Macedonia, who spoke very little Swedish, demonstrated a 40-centimetre green sprout with leaves, gesticulating enthusiastically and telling us: "I brought a hazelnut from Macedonia. I crushed the

crust it a little and planted it and look, now it grows here". This woman had also grown some grapevines that her daughter had brought to her from her hometown.

1. Gardeners in Persborg allotment gardens, Malmö
Photo: Ebba Lisberg Jensen

The enthusiasm showed the joy of constituting an unbroken biological connection to the place of origin. We immediately associated her action with a very significant event in the national epos of Swedish migration to Northern America in the nineteenth century by Vilhelm Moberg. His main character, Kristina, brings with her from Småland an Astrakhan apple kernel, and she plants it close to her new home in Minnesota. She lives there to see it grow and sprout, and when it finally bears fruit, she is ready to die:

> Suddenly the mouth grew stiff, the lower jaw stopped in an attempted motion. The eyelids twitched and the whites became enlarged. Her breath was drawn out while the voice grew even weaker. "I recognise it… Our Astrakhans are ripe…"
>
> Then there came only a soft sigh as she breathed out: "Our apples are ripe. I'm home…"
>
> There was a spasm in her arms, then they lay still, and the hands' hold on the fruit loosened. The big apple rolled slowly down the slope of the blanket and fell with a thud on the floor near the bed.[12]

Bringing seeds and seedlings is a common phenomenon. To bring well-known plants may enhance the feeling of "rooting" in a new environment – the opposite of the "uprooting" that a migration causes. It creates a feeling of being at home that seems to be a universal urge. One informant, a Palestinian man in his sixties who had lived in Sweden for twenty years, felt that what he perceived as climate change was reflected in his increasing sense of feeling at home: "It used to be hard to get plants to grow, but now everything grows here, it is warmer now. Climate is changing."

Our world is increasingly globalizing. People move but maintain and establish personal relationships across the globe. One example of this was an Iraqi man in his forties, with his little daughter helping him and translating, who told us about his squash plants: "This is *American* squash. It is much bigger. I got it from a relative in Canada." The allotment garden had also helped him to get in contact with an ethnic Swede, though he seemed not to talk Swedish at all: "I got the rose from my friend. He is a Swede, he owns the allotment garden right there. He said: 'You are my friend, I will give you this plant.'"

Multiculturalism is a very concrete phenomenon in the allotment gardens. People stick to their traditions, species and varieties, but they also accept new variations of crops, exchange seeds with each other and live side by side.

CONTESTED BIODIVERSITY

Plants and the choice of plants are symbolically laden, showing that the gardener is open-minded, artistic, a fancy globetrotter, or traditional. There is no such thing as value-neutral planting.

Traditionally, gardening in European parks has been focused on landscaping and succeeding in growing exotic and beautiful sorts of trees, bushes and flowers. For instance, castle parks in the eighteenth century contained "Chinese parks" with bamboo and houses for oranges. Private gardeners have also taken a pride in collecting exotic flowers from other parts of the world and transforming their own little patches. This can be seen as early expressions of the globalization and biological diversity described above.

Today, many cities lack sufficient greenery. Foliage and lawns, besides offering beauty to the citizens, are also said to provide *ecological services* such as cleaning air and water, slowing water flows and floods, decreasing urban heating and cold winds, absorbing pollutions and noise, etc.[13]

A central trait in this ambition is to create biodiversity, enhancing living conditions for animals and plants in order to provide these services. Greenery is said to be an important factor when creating a *sustainable city*.

During the last decade, a number of national actors have launched campaigns to inform and stimulate planners to achieve this goal of sustainability. For instance, a publication by the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation and the Centre for Biological Diversity stresses the need to plant *domestic* species:

> To favour biodiversity in choice of plants, one can *imitate nature* in the surrounding landscape, i.e. choose indigenous, wild species within their natural habitat and adapt the choice of place, biotope and succession.[14]

This is an example of how the concept of biodiversity denotes the natural, the original and the domestic, as discussed above. The statement shows a more conservationist discourse, where original nature is the ideal rather than refinement and exoticism.

But the times are changing and so are ideals. One example is that city gardeners in Malmö city centre say that the urban environment demands a completely new set of species:

> The urban environment is barren. The soil is compacted and impoverished and there is less air and water in the ground. The circumstances are different from a hundred years ago, when many of these elm trees were planted. Today, we use many trees from exotic places. Today we also spread risks, by employing a variety of species and varieties.[15]

In this quotation, biodiversity seem to be a question of functionality and stability rather than an issue of aboriginality. Hence, the concept of biodiversity today also includes exotic species, which makes it even more complex. The old idea that the original, untouched biota is the most stable and resilient to change is thereby contested.

CONTESTED CULTURAL DIVERSITY

A parallel to the changing understanding of diversity in nature is found in the discourse of multiculturalism. Conservative xenophobic political actors maintain the idea that a balanced, harmonic society must be culturally and ethnically homogeneous. Foreigners are seen as anomalies, elements in the "wrong" environment, similar to the biological idea of "exots". A lot of political energy is put into the rhetoric aiming to repatriate them – or, if this cannot be achieved, to assimilate them in Swedish society and culture. In some cases, the parallel between immigrants and plants is obvious: Immigrants are depicted as invasive species, ready to invade, spread uncontrolled and dominate Sweden:

> Mass immigration, together with the high nativity among some immigrant groups and the absence of assimilation policies, means that Swedes within a few decades risk becoming a minority in their own country. This development will affect all aspects of societal life and transform our country beyond recognition.[16]

This way of describing people – as an invasive species with destructive capabilities – is obviously not politically correct. The old idea that it is birth, rather than citizenship, that constitutes "Swedishness", associates people with something that is either "in its place", or "out of place", hence, an anomaly, a disorder, an invasive species. This idea, essentialism, describes national culture as inherent rather than socially constructed and fluid.

On the other hand, in the discourse of Swedish political establishment, cultural diversity is always held up as inherently good. Any problematizing or criticism of policies of multiculturalism is interpreted as unacceptable.[17] Postmodern open-mindedness towards difference and the rejection of racism as a rule, nevertheless, does not apply to plants:

> Giant hogweed is very competitive and forces out and displaces domestic plant species. The Swedish Environmental Protection Agency considers it to be a threat to biological diversity.[18]

An interesting feature here is that it is not the *Swedish flora* as such that is threatened, but *biodiversity* itself. One might think that one more species should increase biodiversity, but this is not the case. Instead, the concept of biodiversity is used in the sense of "original". Biodiversity comes to mean "species in their places".

We started out by drawing a parallel between the concept of biological and cultural diversity. There are many similarities, not least the critique against modernity's idea of creating uniformity and order. But there are also differences. Multiculturalism is generally accepted as something desirable and a condition for a sustainable society – except among more or less overtly racist political organizations. Among them, multiculturalism as such is a threat to what they think of as the original "order", people in their "right places". Biological diversity, analogous as it may seem, is much more complex. It may on one hand denote a variety of individuals, species and populations, but, on the other hand, it is often used as synonymous with original, untouched and indigenous nature.

2. "The African park".

An experiment with the establishment of a savannah-like landscape on an overgrown pasture in Bunkeflostrand
Photo: Ebba Lisberg Jensen

Sometimes, when exotic species are put in new settings, as in parks or the gardens of the rich and wealthy, they may be associated with elegance and international influences with a high cultural status. One example is the palm trees that are put out every summer on the long beach walk in Trelleborg, giving the city an air of Cannes. They also alert strong

feelings of homesickness among the immigrants of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern origin that we have interviewed. But the palms are not planted; they grow in pots. If they were planted, and if it were warm enough for them to grow, they would probably provoke more debate. When immigrants bring with them and change the biological diversity in the allotment gardens, it may be seen as very positive by some, while others may find it a threatening manifestation of their difference and a threat to native culture and nature.

One way of enhancing biological and cultural diversity could be to establish "multicultural" gardens with exotic trees, bushes and plants. This has been done, for example, in York, to create social integration and sustainable development. This idea was presented to students during a lecture at Malmö University, but it turned out to be highly provocative. The basic argument among the students was that immigrants have to adapt to "our Swedish nature". But the idea of "Swedish nature" in urban green areas is somehow obsolete. A book on famous trees in the parks of Malmö shows that almost every park tree is of exotic origin.[19]

When it comes to gardens, nature is physically a social construction – and has always been so. People, like flowers, do not "belong" in a particular place. Instead, it is a part of our biological history to move around and bring species with us. Sometimes new societies and new farming habits appear. The difference is that migration and exchange of plants is faster today than it has ever been before. But, eventually, differences may not be that visible anymore. Or, as one informant told us: "You have to grow with your garden", meaning that it takes time, but don't give up. Maybe this holds true for a multicultural society with biological diversity too.

NOTES

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3 Idem, p.153.
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6 Idem.
7 Verena Andermatt Conlay, 1997. *The Environment in Poststructuralist Thought.* Routledge: London and New York.
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9 Magnus Boström, 2001. *Miljörörelsens mångfald*. Arkiv förlag: Lund
10 This phenomenon has also been described by Inger Pedersen, & Aila Peterson 2006, *Zatar och ingefära: En bok om växter, odlingstips och huskurer*. Malmö museer; and also by Karine Mannerfelt 2009. *Kolonilotten: Världens trädgård*. Stockholmia Förlag.
11 Mannerfelt 2009.
12 Vilhelm Moberg, 1995(1959). *The Last Letter Home*. Minnesota Historical Society Press. Translation by Gustaf Lannestock, p. 146.
13 Mats Gyllin & Annika Kruuse af Verchou, "Stadens ekologi: Många möjligheter i det gröna" in Ebba Lisberg Jensen & Pernilla Ouis (eds). 2008. *Inne och ute i Malmö: Studier av urbana förändringsprocesser.* Malmö.
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17 Carlbom, Aje. 2003. *The imagined versus the real other: Multiculturalism and the representation of Muslims in Sweden.* Department of Sociology, Lund University.
18 Tierp Municipality website. 11 June 2009. http://www.tierp.se/Fritid-Natur--Kultur/Djur-och-

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19 Arne Jansson & Peter Linder. 2007. *Träd i Malmö: En vandring bland vackra och ovanliga träd*. (Trees in Malmö: A walk among beautiful and unusual trees). ABF.