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# Nationalism vs. Nationalism: The Challenge of the Sweden Democrats in the Swedish Public Debate

SOMETHING INTRIGUING IS HAPPENING IN SWEDEN.[1] IN THE 2010 general elections, the nationalist political party, Sverigedemokraterna (Sweden Democrats, SD), had its electoral breakthrough. With 5.7 per cent of the total votes the party crossed the threshold of representation in the national parliament. Elsewhere in Europe nationalist, immigration-sceptic parties had already made headway;[2] with the SD in parliament, Sweden is no longer an exception. The SD enjoys a privileged position between the winning centre-right coalition and the Left–Green opposition, and can potentially tip the scales in favour of either political bloc.

Four years earlier, after the 2006 elections, the party had emerged from the shadows of the far right. The SD received 2.93 per cent of the votes – not enough to secure a position in parliament (which has a 4 per cent threshold), but enough to gain representation in almost half the country's municipalities. Before the 2006 elections the SD was hardly noticed in the media; afterwards, it became a high-profile party in the public debate.

This article considers the early public debates about the SD. We will demonstrate how the visibility of the SD in the print media in Sweden encourages both SD allies and SD opponents to stress their views on Swedishness and social cohesion. The reactions to the SD validate certain values and norms that supposedly link Swedes to a

distinct national community. Our aim is to analyse claims of nationalism in the public debate about the SD and its voters. We will show how the salience of issues pertaining to the national identity in the public debate provided opportunities for the SD to mobilize voters around an immigration-sceptic agenda against 'the elites'.

## WHY POPULIST RADICAL RIGHT-WING PARTIES THRIVE HERE AND NOW

In his overview of the far right and the media, Antonis Ellinas suggests an analysis of the development over time of populist 'radical right parties' (RRPs) in Europe. Ellinas relies on the Sartorian notion of 'threshold of relevance', which is based on the premise that, 'once parties become electorally relevant, their electoral fortunes are determined by different factors than before'.[3] Ellinas suggests a two-stage approach: studying RRPs before and after their initial electoral breakthrough, but we suggest there were three phases in the development of the SD in Swedish politics. The first stage corresponds to the period before 2006, when the SD had very limited media exposure and most commentators disregarded it as an immature movement with neo-Nazi tinges.[4] The second stage took place between 2006 and 2010, when media interest escalated and the mainstream political parties started to worry about the party and gradually also engaged in debates with it. The third stage occured after 2010, when the party crossed the electoral threshold to the Swedish Parliament.

Before a party's electoral breakthrough, Ellinas assumes, it is relevant to focus on the behaviour of the media and the reactions of the mainstream parties to explain the electoral fortunes of the RRPs in subsequent elections.[5] If they are not visible in the print media it is

[3] A. E. Ellinas, *The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe: Playing the Nationalist Card*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 15.

[4] A. Hellström and T. Nilsson, ' "We Are the Good Guys": Ideological Positioning of the Nationalist Party Sverigedemokraterna in Contemporary Swedish Politics', *Ethnicities*, 10: 1 (2010), pp. 55–76.

[5] Ellinas, *The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe*. See also e.g. E. Declair, *Politics on the Fringe: The People, Policies, and Organization of the French National Front*, Durham, NC, Duke University Press, 1999; J. Rydgren, 'The Sociology of the Radical Right', *Annual Review of Sociology*, 33 (2007), pp. 241–62; S. Saveljeff, 'New Questions and New Answers: Strategies Towards Parties with Radical Right-Wing Profiles', *Current Themes 11*, Malmö, IMER/MIM, 2011.

simply not possible for new political parties to challenge the established parties. New parties need the media to orchestrate new political issues.

After the 2006 elections, the media attention devoted to the SD grew significantly.[6] Given this, we suggest that the period between 2006 and 2010 is particularly relevant in considering the behaviour of the media as a cause of the electoral fortunes of the SD in Sweden.[7] By 2006 the SD was not yet a parliamentary party, though it had crossed the 'threshold of relevance' in public debate as the party and its politics became an object of controversy.[8] The RRPs are able to capitalize on these communication resources, Ellinas adds, provided that the mainstream parties 'play the nationalist card': that is, enhance the competition for national identity issues. This is relevant in our case since it prompts us to investigate to what extent the mainstream parties in Sweden also played the nationalist card after the 2006 elections. When the party is in parliament, Ellinas continues, it is likely that the role of the media subsides in importance and then it is increasingly important to focus on the internal party arena; hence, its organizational capacity.

In this article, we will focus on two relevant opportunity structures that might explain the electoral fortunes of the SD after the 2006 elections. Ellinas recognizes a 'socio-cultural shift' in Western Europe starting in the 1990s. Arguably, the RRPs conceive of the economy as a secondary issue,[9] yet they hold conservative views on issues such as gay marriage, law and order, immigration and national identity.[10]

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[6] Hellström and Nilsson, ' "We Are the Good Guys" ', p. 74.

[7] A study of nationalist claims around the period of the 2010 elections would preferably differentiate between the framing of these claims as expressed by different political and media actors on different arenas. The SD certainly played a bigger role in the public debate in the 2010 election campaigns, compared to the debates preceding the 2006 elections – this makes it possible to scrutinize the role of journalists and the media in the framing of issues in 2010. Also, after the 2010 elections it is feasible to investigate parliamentary debates which now include SD representatives. These differentiations are not possible for 2006–7. These observations place a limitation on the scope of this particular study.

[8] A. Hellström, *Vi är de Goda: Den Offentliga Debatten om Sverigedemokraterna och Deras Politik*, Hägersten, Tankekraft, 2010.

[9] C. Mudde, *Populist Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, ch. 5.

[10] Ellinas, *The Media and the Far Right in Western Europe*, p. 26.

First, then, the relative salience of these issues in the public debate provides favourable opportunities for the RRPs to capitalize on their media exposure to mobilize voters – from both the left and the right – around themes of culture conservatism. The realignment process, from the socio-economic cleavage that 'pits workers against capital'[11] to the socio-cultural dimension in the public debate thus provides a favourable opportunity that might explain why RRPs succeed in some countries and not in others. Jens Rydgren applied this explanation in a comparison of Sweden and Denmark to explain why RRPs have been much more successful in Denmark than in Sweden.[12] Although the parties in the two countries share many attributes, such as anti-immigration sentiments in the population and widespread feelings of disenchantment, they diverge concerning the dominance of the socio-economic dimension (which has lost much of its significance in Denmark, though not in Sweden) and in the importance of the immigration issue in the public debate (which is much more dominant in Denmark than in Sweden).

Second, another favourable opportunity for the SD concerned the degree of convergence in the political space. Peter Mair points out that the political identities of the mainstream European parties are increasingly blurred, which provides opportunities for the RRPs to gain electoral fortunes.[13] In this vein, Slavoj Žižek argues that the RRPs represent the only movement challenging the partisan consensus on the virtues of liberal democracy and market economy.[14] Chantal Mouffe acknowledges in this regard 'a moralization of politics' in post-Cold War European politics; hence, 'politics is being played out in the moral register' and political antagonisms are structured as moral categories.[15] A high degree of convergence at the

[11] Rydgren, 'The Sociology of the Radical Right', p. 253.

[12] J. Rydgren, 'Radical Right-Wing Populism in Denmark and Sweden: Explaining Party System Change and Stability', *SAIS Review*, 30: 1 (2010), pp. 57–71; see also H. Kitschelt, *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 1995.

[13] P. Mair, 'Populist Democracy vs Party Democracy', in Y. Mény (ed.), *Democracies and the Populist Challenge*, Gordonsville, Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.

[14] S. Žižek, 'Why We All Love to Hate Haider', *New Left Review*, 2 (2000), pp. 37–45; see also D. Arter, 'The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party? The Case of the True Finns', *Government and Opposition*, 45: 4 (2010), pp. 484–504.

[15] C. Mouffe, *On the Political*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 75.

centre thus provides a favourable structure for the RRPs to challenge established party hierarchies and provides some explanation for the polarization of the immigration issue in the public debate: not primarily between left and right, but also between 'good' and 'evil'.

NATIONALIST CLAIMS IN THE PUBLIC DEBATE

In the public debate that took place in 2006–7 the SD claimed to recognize the views of the 'ordinary person' who, in its view, opposed the agenda of the political elite. In the academic literature, this position is typically referred to as 'populist'[16] and corresponds to several political parties in Western Europe. Populist parties, typically, base their political rhetoric on a sharp division between 'the people' and 'the elite', in a way designed to blame 'the elite' for not listening to 'the common people' and for having little concern for their needs, views and interests.[17]

The SD offered citizens a promise of protection against foreign elements that might jeopardize the perceived bond between the national demos and the national territory. In terms of solidarity, it claimed to stand up for the 'man on the street' in a complex world, and argued that national society cannot withstand much cultural pluralism. SD representatives tended to distance themselves from ideas of racial superiority and blatant racism, yet declared that different cultures neither could nor should be fused together.[18] Based on the party's self-presentation, we choose to describe the SD as a nationalist party that explicitly invokes the populist divide between the people and the elite to mobilize support for its politics.[19]

[16] See e.g. C. Ruzza and S. Fella, *Re-Inventing the Italian Right: Populism, Post-Fascism and Territorial Identity*, London, Routledge, 2009; Paul Taggart, *Populism*, Buckingham, Open University Press, 2000.

[17] M. Canovan discusses various populist appeals to 'the people' such as 'the united people', 'our people' and also 'the common people' that have different implications and oppose 'elites' of various kinds, such as 'political', 'cultural', or 'economic' elites; M. Canovan, 'Trust the People! Populism and the Two Faces of Democracy', *Political Studies*, 47 (1999), pp. 2–16.

[18] See e.g. A. Gingrich and M. Banks, 'Introduction', in Andre Gingrich and Marcus Banks (eds), *Neo-Nationalism in Europe and Beyond: Perspectives from Social Anthropology,* New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2006.

[19] At the SD Party Congress in Gothenburg in November 2011, the SD decided on a new party programme to define its ideology as based on 'social conservatism' as well

Nationalist movements and nationalist ideologies tend to be associated with secessionist and irredentist movements. Alternatively, nationalism is seen as a residue from a violent twentieth century and its remnants today are merely manifest in various extremist groupings. These views, following Michael Billig, fail to acknowledge the nationalism of our common sense: that nationalism can be banal, non-violent and possess a reassuring normality.[20] Limiting our understanding of nationalism to the 'property of others'[21] obscures the fact that nationalist ideologies are typically represented as something 'natural' and thus not nationalist at all. Conversely, following Billig, by 'banal nationalism' we, the citizens, are constantly reminded of our membership of the nation and our loyalty to it.

Scholars of Swedish nationalism focus on an integrative form of nationalism that is institutionalized and naturalized.[22] The contingent articulations of this tacitly presupposed common-sense nationalism constitute the context in which opponents to the SD respond to the SD. According to Patrik Hall, an established state such as Sweden operates as an agent that realizes the national identity of its citizens,[23] and the territory of Sweden is thereby attributed a set of moral messages. The divide between the SD and its opponents is particularly interesting in this regard as it brings to the surface a set of moral principles that separate 'them' (the SD as 'bad nationalists' that mobilize around a nationalist response to the political establishment) from 'us' (the mainstream parties that ascribe to a set of moral principles that serve to preserve Sweden as a democratic state and national community).

Nationalism in this sense refers to claims of community cohesion centred on 'the nation' as a common frame of reference. We here follow Umut Özkirimli, who contends that nationalism is a form of

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as 'nationalism'. According to the party leader, Jimmie Åkesson, this was not to orient the party to 'the right' – conversely he maintains that the idea of the people's home is rooted in social conservatism. This rhetorical shift arguably provides a means to broaden the SD agenda to include more political issues and thus attract more potential voters (see interview with Jimmie Åkesson in *Dagens Nyheter*, 24 November 2011).

[20] M. Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, London, Sage, 1995, p. 6.

[21] Ibid., p. 17.

[22] P. Hall, *The Social Construction of Nationalism: Sweden as an Example*, Lund, Lund University Press, 1998; H. Berggren and L. Trägårdh, *Är Svensken Människa? Gemenskap och Oberoende i det Moderna Sverige*, Stockholm, Norstedts, 2006.

[23] Hall, *The Social Construction of Nationalism*, p. 135.

discourse that structures the reality around us.[24] In this vein, it is nationalism that defines the nations and not the other way round. Following Özkirimli, nationalist claims provide a communication strategy that: (1) divides the world into homogeneous and fixed identity positions; (2) creates a temporal lineage from the past, through the present and by way of extrapolation into the future to demonstrate the diachronic presence of the nation; and finally (3) is based on a preoccupation with the national territory, imagined or real. In addition to this, we also follow Michael Freeden, who argues that nationalist claims rest on a positive valorization assigned to one's own nation, granting it specific claims for social cohesion.[25]

In summary, we interpret nationalist claims as a particular communication strategy that seeks to reify and naturalize the nation as something natural and commonsensical. We thus understand the public debate on the SD after the 2006 national elections as a rhetorical struggle between nationalist claims that differ in content between SD protagonists and SD opponents.

In analysing nationalist claims in the public debate, we make use of Mudde's concept of nativist antagonisms. While populism appears chameleonic, indeterminate and context-specific, nativism constitutes a determinant factor that unites the otherwise disparate RRPs, Mudde argues. Nativism holds that the national communities should be exclusively inhabited by the members of the native population; Sweden belongs to the Swedes.[26] We here emphasize the political messages that demarcate the nativist aspects of what brings the community together from the non-native elements that allegedly put social cohesion at risk. The singling-out of non-native elements can be done in many ways – for example through racial, ethnic and religious distinctions – and also more subtly through common norms, language and ideas of a joint political culture. We translate nationalist claims in the public debate to a set of nativist antagonisms that makes a distinction between the natives (people and ideas) and what is considered non-native.

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[24] U. Özkirimli, *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, pp. 206–9.

[25] M. Freeden, 'Is Nationalism a Distinct Ideology?', *Political Studies*, 46 (1998), pp. 751–2.

[26] Mudde, *Populist Radical Right in Western Europe*, p. 22; Arter, 'The Breakthrough of Another West European Populist Radical Right Party?', p. 492.

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WELFARE, CULTURE AND DEMOCRACY

Our analytical framework is guided by frame analysis to identify contrasting nationalist claims in the public debate on the SD and its voters, manifest in the print media. The media is an arena for public debate and public scrutiny in which conflicting opinions relating to the SD's politics are articulated, including the opinions and views of the journalists themselves.[27] News production concerns how events and issues are organized in a communicative message: hence, framing. In this context, 'framing' refers to the manner in which the media organizes communication in order to provoke a certain interpretation in the reader. We assume that this framing affects popular opinion, whether this is by defining the problem, casual interpretation, moral evaluation or the recommendation that certain actions take place.[28] According to frame analyst Robert Entman, '[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text'.[29] In our analysis we wish to scrutinize nationalist claims – translated into a set of nativist antagonisms – that frame the public debate around the SD and its voters.

The empirical material has been collected via the media database Mediearkivet, which comprises a set of news items, editorials, letters to the editor and so forth from major national and local newspapers in Sweden.[30] Our analysis is limited to the themes of welfare, culture and democracy to cover not a complete, but comprehensive enough selection of articles pinpointing key issues in the public debate surrounding the SD. Articles were selected by means of a search using the words 'Sverigedemokraterna', 'Culture', 'Welfare' and 'Democracy', covering the time period from 18 September 2006 to 31 May 2007 (from the day after the general elections to about eight months later, when the SD held its annual meeting). The theme of welfare

[27] Recent research on journalism demonstrates how opinionated material tends to intertwine with the daily news reporting, see further K. Horsti, 'Polarized Views on Migration: Impact of the Changing Journalistic Field on Immigration Debate in the Nordic Countries', paper presented at the Seventh Annual Conference of IMISCOE, Liège, 2010.

[28] R. M. Entman, 'Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm', *Journal of Communication*, 43: 4 (1993), pp. 51–8.

[29] Ibid., p. 52.

[30] Mediearkivet, 'News Material from Swedish Newspapers', 1 September 2006 to 30 May 2007, www.mediearkivet.se, accessed January 2011.

connotes the earlier mentioned socio-economic dimension in the public debate. Our analysis here will emphasize opinions and arguments that concern the popular use of the metaphor of the 'people's home' (see below) in the public debate, by both allies and opponents of the SD. In particular, leading Social Democratic actors showed themselves prone to counter the SD.[31] The theme of culture corresponds to the socio-cultural dimension. We here devote attention to interpretations of what constitutes 'Swedishness' and the national community in terms of values, norms and identities.[32] Finally, the theme of democracy involves ideas of what constitutes a well-functioning democracy; here the focus is on the governing of the people and the relationship between people and elites.[33]

In the analysis, we identify and highlight dominant patterns in the material as a whole, rather than systematically differentiate between different genres (for example editorial, news items, and so on), actors (politicians, journalists, and so on) or different categories of media (morning paper or evening paper). The analysis draws on a selection of articles that concern the debate between the Social Democrats and the SD regarding the link between immigration and welfare; articles that concern the topical issue of Swedishness, much prevalent in the cultural pages; and finally news items and articles that discuss the government of the people and the relationship between the elites and the people. We thereby aim to present supporting evidence for the importance of socio-cultural issues in the public debate after the 2006 elections.

WELFARE FOR NATIVES

In the 1980s Sweden was described by Gøsta Esping-Andersen, one of the leading experts on welfare states, as the perfect example of a social democratic welfare state regime.[34] Sweden's rationale was to

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[31] The theme of welfare covers 182 articles. In the analysis, we explicitly refer to a sample of 63 articles that also include the search word 'Social Democrat'.

[32] The theme of culture covers in total 190 articles. In the analysis, we explicitly refer to a sample of 66 articles that also include the search word 'Swedish'.

[33] The theme of democracy covers in total 332 articles. In the analysis, we explicitly refer to a sample of 85 articles that also include the search word 'people'.

[34] G. Esping-Anderson, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990.

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pursue a welfare state that promoted a general high standard of living. All strata were incorporated in one universal insurance system and socio-economic differences in society supposed to be kept to a minimum by means of the state's general policies of redistribution.

In Sweden, the evolution of a strong welfare state was linked to the consolidation of the democratic state. Popular use of the phrase 'people's home' by leading Social Democrats from the late 1920s onwards demonstrates the relevance of nationalist claims to mobilize support for a class-transgressing welfare regime for all Swedish people.[35] The people's home alluded to a trinity of democracy, the people and the nation that contributed to establish the founding myth of the modern Swedish national community to which the SD returned in its rhetoric. Given the rapid changes in the world economy, the SD portrays itself as the defender of the people's home; according to the party's leader, Jimmie Åkesson, Swedish society was better off before, when it was seen as more culturally uniform.[36] He claims that recent mass immigration to Sweden provides a serious threat to the welfare state and the 'people's home'. In a letter to the editor of the Christian Democratic newspaper *Dagen*, SD member Erik Almqvist, now a member of parliament (MP), says that to maintain 'a community of solidarity' Sweden has to commit to the fundamental values of the nation state.[37] Adopting strict policies for immigrants from Islamic countries is central, Almqvist adds, especially as the Swedish community is profoundly Christian.

In this rhetoric, the 'people's home' calls attention to Sweden's conservative and Christian foundation. The 'people's home' metaphor is often invoked to hark back to an imagined past, as exemplified by SD member Kristiansson, who in an interview explained that he wanted to reclaim the country in which he grew up.[38] He calls for actions to safeguard national symbols such as the flag and the national anthem and for efforts to be made to restore Swedish honour. This line of argument is part of a theme that merges common values – often those equated with Christendom, such as solidarity – as a precondition for the Swedish welfare system, with a

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[35] See further Å. Linderborg, *Socialdemokraterna Skriver Historia: Historieskrivning som Ideologisk Maktresurs*, Stockholm, Atlas Akademi, 2001.

[36] Interview in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 22 May 2007.

[37] *Dagen*, 20 May 2007.

[38] Interview in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 5 November 2006.

nostalgia for an imagined homogeneous Swedish community not yet disturbed by (too) much immigration from (too) culturally remote locations. This rhetorical operation makes explicit a nativist antagonism between the rights of those naturally belonging to the people's home to enjoy welfare privileges and those who do not possess these rights: the non-natives. The SD claims this perception to be deeply rooted in the post-war experience of uniting the nation after the Second World War.

The SD refers to Per-Albin Hansson (prime minister of Sweden from 1932 to 1946, who applied the people's home label to the Social Democratic reformist agenda) as a key inspiration for its politics, although it also pledges allegiance to the late nineteenth-century conservative nationalist movement in Sweden.[39] The SD claims to be the rightful heir of a long Social Democratic tradition of safeguarding the interests of the common people. In SD rhetoric, the party adheres to the more traditional version of social democracy than today's Social Democratic Party does. The SD argues that the Social Democratic Party has betrayed its ideological roots and thus also the Swedish people. In SD thinking, the mainstream parties fail to acknowledge the interests of the people and instead privilege elite groups in society that are less vulnerable to the deterioration of welfare state institutions.

The populist appeals to the people, Paul Taggart says, presuppose the commitments to 'the heartland' – an idealized past society, populated by a culturally homogeneous 'people'.[40] In the case of the SD, these appeals are centred on a particular symbiosis of the universal welfare state and cultural conformism; hence, the people's home concept suits the party well. The SD's emphasis on welfare and its comprehension of the Swedish model conveys restrictive policies on immigration. Conversely, the Social Democratic leader, Mona Sahlin, argued in a televised debate with Åkesson that the progression of the strong Swedish welfare system has always been dependent on people moving to that country.[41] In similar vein, Luciano Astudillo of the Social Democrats confronts SD backwardness: 'Turning back the clock to the 1970s, as the SD suggests, is not possible, even though

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[39] See further Hellström, *Vi är de Goda.*

[40] Taggart, *Populism.*

[41] Interview in *Expressen*, 20 April 2007.

many people would like to do this'.[42] Nevertheless, he confirms the need to retain common denominators such as the national anthem and the Swedish flag. This exchange of views concerns who has the right to possess these symbols.

In the 2006 general elections the Social Democrats were ousted from power and a new government was formed by an alliance of centre-right parties. This led several commentators to link the SD's growth to the failure of the Social Democratic Party. The SD's success is often associated with a crisis affecting the welfare state, a view that is confirmed by the former Social Democrat minister Morgan Johansson, who in a debate article stated that many voters with a working-class background switched their allegiance to the SD because they thought that the Social Democrats had not sufficiently compensated for the erosion of welfare institutions.[43]

This perceived crisis of the welfare system proved to be a fertile ground for the SD. The party alluded to the causal link between immigration and the deficits of the welfare state. Also in the rhetoric of many SD critics, the welfare state and its symbolism – including norms of solidarity and universalism – constitute a nativist antagonism between non-native elements that risks eliminating the 'traditional' Swedish model of redistributing welfare among the population and the native Swedish ideals of civic cohesion. The socio-economic cleavage is in this sense still very relevant in Sweden. The debate on welfare politics during this period was also framed along the socio-cultural dimension, even though divergences in the public debate on welfare involved ideals of social and cultural cohesion, epitomized by the frequent use of the people's home metaphor. This brings us to the theme of culture.

NATIVE CULTURE AND OTHER CULTURES

In SD rhetoric, 'culture' connotes abstract assumptions about a mythical core of Swedishness with roots far back in history. It is apparent that culture and cultural differences played an important role in the transformation of the party. The SD was aware that few voters are inclined to vote for a party that pursues blatant racist

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[42] Quoted in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 5 November 2006.
[43] *Dagens Nyheter*, 17 October 2006.

rhetoric in terms of ideas of racial superiority. However, its politics is still depicted as controversial, and some party members have even lost their jobs as a result of their party affiliation.[44]

In a programme on immigration politics of May 2007, the party defined what it means by Swedish identity: 'Swedish applies to the one who has a principal Swedish identity, and is from his/her own perspective and by others regarded as Swedish'.[45] Accordingly, the SD maintains that it is important to know who you are and where you belong, especially in insecure times. Party leader Åkesson argues that the minaret, a tangible symbol of the 'new' multicultural Sweden, generates feelings of insecurity among Swedes who are in danger of feeling foreign in their own country.[46] The idea of a distinct Swedish culture provides the glue that bonds Swedes together. The image portrayed is of a long-lost homogeneous Swedish society that clings to the myth of a common ancestry and an original home, and all 'real Swedes' should and could relate to it today. The nativist antagonism expressed here follows classic ethno-cultural patterns and dovetails with Özkirimli's triad of nationalism claims introduced earlier. SD members do not seem to share a clear idea of what constitutes this Swedish culture, however, other than a few peculiar traditional dishes, midsummer parties and school graduation days in church. In contrast, their concerns about problems in contemporary Sweden are attributed to 'other cultures', most predominantly Islam.

The SD perceives multiculturalism as the source of most societal problems, although it does not deny the people have a right to reside in their cultural enclaves. Again, the populist divide is invoked: between the elite who allegedly embrace the realities of multicultur-alism and the people who, supposedly, are fed up with the reverse side of integration. SD press manager Mattias Karlsson adds that these concerns are probably most widespread among the working class, whereas the social elite puts its faith in cosmopolitan and norm-disrupting ideas.[47]

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[44] See further N. Orrenius, *Jag är inte Rabiat. Jag äter Pizza: En Bok om Sverigedemokra-terna*, Stockholm, Månpocket, 2010.

[45] Sverigedemokraterna, 'Invandringspolitiskt program: Antaget vid riksårsmötet den 19 maj 2007', http://sverigedemokraterna.se/vara-asikter/invandringspolitisk program, accessed August 2010.

[46] Cited in *Sydsvenskan*, 22 April 2007.

[47] Cited in *Göteborgs-Posten*, 5 November 2006.

The SD view on Swedish culture refers to, in its own words, 'open Swedishness' – in theory all are welcome to become Swedish citizens, though for extra-European immigrants it might take generations of assimilation to succeed in this endeavour. They must become like us but not all of them – because of their attachments with their 'home cultures' – are equally suited to accomplish this task. To be born in Sweden is, for instance, not always enough to claim affinity to the Swedish community. For example, Mattias Karlsson (a member of the SD party board) declared that the football player Zlatan Ibrahimovic was not Swedish. In an interview broadcast on national Swedish radio, he said: 'I do not regard him as Swedish in the way he thinks, acts and talks. He displays an attitude that in many ways does not feel typically Swedish . . . He displays a body language and a language in general that I do not really comprehend as Swedish.'[48] Ibrahimovic is a Swedish citizen by birth and in this sense culture serves to consolidate a firm line between those considered to be assimilated well into the Swedish culture and those who are not, whether born in the country or not.

The image of Sweden as presented by the SD has hardly existed – not in the 1950s and certainly not today, runs the counter-argument. It is common that opponents underline the positive aspects of immigration while repeatedly referring to the problem of a 'lack of integration'. Despite comparative research showing that Sweden scores very well in the area of integration politics,[49] various commentators and politicians are eager to return to the integration failure mantra in the public debate.[50]

Instead of turning to nostalgic visions of 'the heartland', the counter-arguments suggest, one should either embrace 'the new Sweden' with all its characteristics or find ways of combining the ideals of multiculturalism with efforts to unite on core values and norms eligible for everyone, and thereby improve the integration of immigrants in the Swedish society. Several commentators state that the SD is maladjusted to a modern society in which cultures co-exist,

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[48] Cited in *Kvällsposten*, 8 March 2007. Karlsson has collected a series of quotations to demonstrate that his view was widely shared by leading sports journalists: M. Karlsson, 'Svenskheten och hycklarnas Parad', *Karlsson Blogg* 10 March 2010, at http://www.sdkuriren.se/blog/index.php/karlsson/2007/03/10/svenskheten_och_ hycklarnas_parad, accessed August 2010.

[49] See e.g. J. Niessen, T. Huddleston and L. Citron, 'Migrant Integration Policy Index', British Council and Migration Policy Group, 2007, www.integrationindex.eu.

[50] See further Hellström, *Vi är de Goda*.

and point at the same time to the need for different cultures to converge on common principles such as human rights, democracy and gender equality. In this perspective, the problem with the SD is that it does not appreciate and commit to these values in a convincing way.

Paolo Roberto, a former Swedish boxer who is now a popular public spokesperson, visited a small-town school and commented: 'Immigration entails that Sweden faces its hitherto most significant change'.[51] He adds that those who believe that voting for the SD would stop this development are simply 'losers'. Sharing the assumption that modern immigration to Sweden constitutes the most significant challenge to the country yet, this perception indicates that cultures are separable entities that should either co-exist (his view) or be kept separate (the SD view).

Evidently, culture serves a dividing line between the native culture and non-native elements that allegedly put social cohesion at risk. The positive valorization of the national community and the emphasis on Swedishness in the public debate here involves ideas that the SD ties into wider social changes to which 'we' need to adjust without losing track of what brings 'us' together. The SD radicalizes concerns that are already voiced by some of the mainstream parties, albeit contested by others. For instance, the Liberal Party articulates the necessity of a cultural core in order to achieve social cohesion, as expressed in policy discussions, to tighten the qualifications for Swedish citizenship and the use of a literary canon in education. These proposals were heavily criticized by others, such as the Greens and the Left Party.[52]

In summary, the mainstream parties are divided on the need for cultural cohesion to achieve community stability. However, the polarization between the SD and the other parties tends to overshadow partisan controversies on socio-cultural issues in the public arena. Certainly, the national identity was a matter of controversy in public debates after the 2006 elections. To what extent there has been an actual shift from socio-economic to socio-cultural issues is at this point difficult to say. This brings us to a closer scrutiny of the

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[51] Quote from *Mora Tidning*, 26 January 2007.

[52] See further Hellström, *Vi är de Goda*, p. 146; and P. Stoltz, 'Canons and Communities. Children and Social Cohesion in Sweden and the Netherlands', *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 6: 1 (2011), pp. 39–52.

degree of convergence in the political space and to the theme of democracy.


## THE ELITE AND THE PEOPLE OR THE ELITE VERSUS THE PEOPLE

While the established parties seek to discredit SD politics as an anomaly in an otherwise unprejudiced Swedish debate, the SD presents itself as a party for the 'common people'. This tension became stronger after the established parties formed new and formerly unthinkable alliances to block the SD in forums of formal influence in the municipalities. Accordingly, SD representatives suggested that the rules of democracy were applied differently and used discriminatorily.[53]

For a long time other parties preferred to talk about the SD and not with it. The self-image of the party as democratic victim soon became a uniting cause among SD members. As a consequence, the SD portrays Swedish politics as an elite consensual affair with a distorted link to the people,[54] arguing that the democratic system is bureaucratized and only serves the interests of the political elite. One of the SD's primary aims has been to reform the party along more moderate lines. It consistently refers to principles of democracy to put this across to the public. The message is that 'we are the true democrats' and the implicit criticism is that the political establishment is less democratic, or even anti-democratic, as it constrains free speech in the public debate.

An approach employed by the established parties to discredit SD politics is to suggest that SD party members behave like 'political clowns'. They are said to lack knowledge about democratic rules and are ridiculed and portrayed as laymen for their lack of awareness of basic politics. The SD is also criticized for not having enough representatives to fill its seats in the local and regional assemblies and that some of its candidates are appointed after the election and that those who do show up tend to misbehave.[55]

[53] See e.g. interview with Erik Almqvist in *Sydsvenskan*, 10 April 2007.

[54] See e.g. ibid.

[55] See e.g. the editorial writer J. Fredriksson in *Göteborgs-tidningen*, 30 November 2006, who talks about the 'Duckberg mentality' of the SD. J. Jakobsson, 'Sverige-demokraterna i Kommunerna', in H. Arvidsson (ed.), *Högerpopulismen: En Antologi om Sverigedemokraterna*, Stockholm, Premiss förlag, 2009.

Another depiction is that of the SD as a 'devil in disguise'. In previous years the party has constructed a democratic surface, beneath which it is said to be undemocratic, racist and violent.[56] Political representatives from the established parties seek to reveal the party's diffuse features and show the constituency the 'true nature' of its ideology. This message typically connects them to the Nazis. Opponents of the SD sometimes attempt to justify dubious democratic means of counteracting SD views by portraying its party representatives as unable to be accommodated in an open and democratic society: since they are racists, and probably enemies of democracy, they do not deserve the same respect as others. This strategy of shaming the SD risks reinforcing the perception of politics as elitist – marginalizing the SD in the debate might justify its image as a democratic victim. In our reading of the media material, however, a less polemic strategy is put forward to dismantle SD politics, stating that democratic systems contain appropriate safeguards against undemocratic movements. In this view, which has gained further resonance over time, the solution to the SD is a deliberative democratic system that focuses on dialogue and rational argument; hence, a strategy of taming. In general, most commentators are careful not to blame SD voters for being undemocratic, racist or violent; they are considered to be misguided and thus could be convinced by reason.

The debate makes explicit a nativist antagonism between the types of democratic norms and principles that do, or do not, allude to decent behaviour in Sweden. The SD argues that democracy is to be given back to the people because the people are the true guardians of a Swedish Sweden. Since politics has turned elitist, the political elites have ruled against the will and interest of the people. Conversely, opponents to the SD argue that the SD violates fundamental democratic principles to respect the equal rights of all people, whether they are of native origin or not.

On the one hand, the mainstream parties united after the 2006 elections in a partisan consensus on the immigration issue against the SD and its voters. On the other hand, there was also a consensus – that became more pronounced over time – to engage in open debates with the SD. This is reflected in the dilemma for the mainstream parties of respecting the SD voters and acknowledging its

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[56] See e.g. debate article by the former parliamentary speaker, Thage G. Petersson, in *Sydsvenskan*, 25 February 2007.

claims, and at the same time nurturing a moral distance from the 'ugly duckling' in the public debate.[57]


CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article we have argued that reactions to the SD are formulated in a nationalist framework. This is not to say that the SD is tarred with the same brush as its opponents, or that all actors are equally nationalist. Instead we argue that there is continuity between imagining the nation as a separate community and current claims to emphasize values of hospitality and tolerance to reify the symbolic boundaries of the nation; hence, to nurture popularly held sentiments that confirm a positive self-presentation of the state.

The SD teeters on the edge of what is acceptable in the public debate. In the welfare arena, the SD blames the Social Democrats for refusing to see the connection between migration and the implosion of the universal welfare system. It urges a return to a more homogeneous Sweden with much less immigration, to defend the 'people's home'. In the area of culture, the SD warns against the dangers of multiculturalism, yet acknowledges everyone's right to associate with 'their' cultures, as long as they stay out of 'our backyard'. In the discussion of democracy, SD members claim to be democratic victims as well as the true democrats.

SD nationalism is quite distinct. The SD concern for civic cohesion – in its positive valorization of Swedish citizenship, for example – is anchored in the ethno-nationalist belief that natives have precedence in their native country. The SD is oriented towards a position that emphasizes ethno-cultural communalities between the citizens in order to maintain social cohesion. Counter-reactions to the SD suggest that SD voters are merely responding to a global crisis that jeopardizes the cohesiveness of the welfare state, patterns of migration that expose Swedish society to the challenges of multiculturalism

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[57] S. Saveljeff suggests that the alternative, to adopt SD views, would cause a severe loss of credibility and was thus not regarded as an attractive option. After the 2006 elections, the mainstream parties relied on either an open adversarial strategy towards the SD or as strategy of silence, but never with agreement; K. Boréus, 'Including or Excluding Immigrants? The Impact of Right-Wing Populism in Denmark and Sweden', in A. B. Bay, B. Bengtsson and P. Strömblad (eds), *Diversity, Inclusion and Citizenship in Scandinavia*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars, 2010.

that result in the failure of integration politics and, finally, the demo-
cratic dilemma provoked by the unwillingness of mainstream parties
to enter into dialogue with the SD.

We suggest that these reactions nurture a polarization between the
SD and the rest, providing opportunities for the SD to occupy the
position of the 'underdog' to mobilize voters around an anti-elitist
agenda. In responding to the SD, various political actors contend that
Swedish society needs to secure the welfare state through the smooth
integration of legal migrants, that the Swedish national culture
should subscribe to a set of core values, and that the national democ-
racy ought to be based on certain principles and decent behaviour.
Counter-reactions to the SD sustain the symbolic boundaries that
demarcate appropriate norms, values and behaviour in Swedish
public life. In this view the SD does not live up to 'Swedish' norms of
tolerance and hospitality.

Yet the SD has transformed itself to become a legitimate political
alternative party, remaining radical yet avoiding being (too) extreme.
The 2010 national elections showed that, at least up to a certain
degree, it had succeeded in this endeavour. In response, the main-
stream parties united in a show of repugnance towards the SD.
Sweden is polarized between a minority attracted by the party and a
majority that dislike the SD more than any other party.[58] The news
reporting on the SD has, according to the journalist and author
Niklas Orrenius, often been based on negative presuppositions about
the party and its followers.[59] Others would disagree,[60] but it is evident
that the print media has provided an arena for mainstream antipa-
thies towards the party.

Bringing the pieces together, our conclusion is that the SD plays a
significant role in the public debate in addition to challenging the
mainstream perception of Sweden – and the Swedes – as being more
tolerant and open-minded than others. That is, commonsense
nationalism – shared and stressed by the mainstream parties in their
resistance to the SD – appears natural, benign and morally good
compared to SD nationalism, which is depicted as evil, malign and

[58] See e.g. S. Holmberg, 'Sverigedemokraterna: Vilka är Dom och Vad Vill Dom?',
in S. Holmberg and L. Weibull, *Det Nya Sverige*, SOM-rapport, 41, Gothenburg, 2007.

[59] Orrenius, *Jag är Inte Rabiat. Jag äter Pizza*.

[60] See e.g. S. B. Ljunggren and J. Nordlund, *Sverigedemokraterna och Medierna*,
Stockholm, Timbro, 2010.

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morally despicable. This framing implies that we love to hate the SD, yet 'we' have not ceased to claim affinity to the Swedish nation.

Before the 2010 elections, the two opposing blocs united in a partisan consensus on the immigration issue and party competition was very much centred on the socio-economic cleavage, as Rydgren suggests.[61] Our findings imply, though, that if we go beyond the party arena and consider the public debate following the 2006 elections, we can detect supporting evidence – by scrutinizing nationalist claims on welfare, culture and democracy – that hints at a realignment towards socio-cultural issues. Our explorative conclusion, and recommendations for further scrutiny, would be that the SD capitalized on the favourable opportunities immediately after the 2006 elections – significant media exposure and a realignment towards socio-cultural issues in the public debate – to enter the national parliament in 2010.

[61]  Rydgren, 'Radical Right-Wing Populism in Denmark and Sweden'.