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This is the published version of a paper published in *Journal of Transnational American Studies*.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Marklund, C. (2016)

From 'False' Neutrality to 'True' Socialism: Unofficial US 'Sweden-bashing' During the Later Palme Years, 1973–1986.

Journal of Transnational American Studies, 7(1): 1-18

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Peer Reviewed

Title:

From “False” Neutrality to “True” Socialism: US “Sweden-bashing” during the Later Palme Years, 1973–1986

Journal Issue:

[Journal of Transnational American Studies, 7\(1\)](#)

Author:

[Marklund, Carl](#), Södertörn University

Publication Date:

2016

Permalink:

<http://escholarship.org/uc/item/0dt8v3mq>

Author Bio:

CARL MARKLUND is Research Fellow in Political Science at Södertörn University in Stockholm. His research has focused on comparative welfare studies, transnational public diplomacy, and geopolitics in a Scandinavian context. Recent publications include “Baltic-Nordic Regionalism” in a special issue of *Ajalooline Ajakiri: The Estonian Historical Journal* (2015), edited with Mart Kuldkepp; *The Paradox of Openness: Transparency and Participation in Nordic Cultures of Consensus* (Brill, 2014), edited with Norbert Götz; and *All Well in the Welfare State? Welfare, Well-being and the Politics of Happiness* (Nordic Centre of Excellence NordWel, 2013).

Keywords:

Transnational, American Studies, Sweden, Olof Palme

Local Identifier:

acgcc_jtas_30647

Abstract:

[abstract pending]

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SPECIAL FORUM

From “False” Neutrality to “True” Socialism: US “Sweden-bashing” during the Later Palme Years, 1973–1986

CARL MARKLUND

Official as well as unofficial perceptions of “the Other” play a significant, yet often understudied role in transnational relations. Politicians and other public personalities are regularly associated with the countries they represent, sometimes even beyond their official functions. For example, Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme’s reaction to the US bombings of North Vietnam’s capital Hanoi in December 1972—above all, Palme’s so-called Christmas speech (*jultalet*)—caused many to view Sweden as a critic of the US and as a friend of the so-called Third World in the early 1970s. The transnational circulation of the image of Sweden as a wealthy Western country that nevertheless protested the East-West and North-South conflict patterns of the Cold War confirmed Sweden’s—and Palme’s—significance by virtue of the very asymmetry between the superpower, the United States, and this small neutral country in northern Europe. In this context, the image of Sweden as well as the public persona of Palme merged and became a Swedish asset in the “cultural Cold War” that unfolded in the shadow of global East-West and North-South tension.¹

That US-Swedish diplomatic relations were strained during Palme’s first years in office (1969–1973) is well known,² but the further development of US views of Sweden from the contentious year of 1973 to the assassination of Palme in 1986 has not yet been studied systematically.³ Previous research shows that the transnational circulation of these images of Sweden have been consciously used and mutually constitutive, but also somewhat exaggerated with regard to actual policy influence

abroad.⁴ Yet the often cited exemplarity of Sweden among progressive countries worldwide—due to its Third World solidarity abroad as well as its social policies at home—also made it the subject of an admittedly marginal, but vocal genre of diagnosis and criticism, first from conservatives, later from liberals, that can be termed “Sweden-bashing.” Key themes in this genre include allegedly totalitarian tendencies in the Swedish welfare state as well as a supposedly anti-Western bias in Swedish Cold War neutrality.⁵

While these originally distinctively American themes were received with considerable skepticism on the part of Swedish conservatives in the early 1970s,⁶ they were gradually picked up in the increasingly critical discussions of the Swedish welfare state that unfolded during the early 1980s. This “shift to the right,” as it has been termed,⁷ coincided with a general reconceptualization of Swedish self-identity as well as foreign images of Sweden in decidedly political ways, underscoring how originally distant actors, marginal discourses and random events may be amplified through transnational circulation of ideas and images. While this shift certainly tied in with rising neoliberalism internationally,⁸ it has also been analyzed as part of a more specific trend in the Swedish intellectual climate,⁹ as an ideological development within the Moderate Party,¹⁰ as a counter-strategy of various organized business interests against the radical left of the 1970s,¹¹ and as a purposive elite strategy of political communication.¹² The shift has thus primarily been understood in terms of propaganda, partisan reinforcement, and evaluations of the state of the Swedish economy.

However, recent advances in the theory of political communication have emphasized the long-term effects of cognitive, agenda-setting, and persuasion effects for ideological change and political communication generally, especially in the context of globalizing media.¹³ As such, global opinion on Sweden was evidently deemed important enough for the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) to keep track of it. Beginning in 1968, the press office at the Swedish MFA began compiling annual reports on foreign press coverage of Sweden. Officially, this was done in response to the greater international interest in the country.¹⁴ These compilations were not intended to be comprehensive, but aimed to identify the most significant trends in the image of Sweden abroad. Using this official Swedish tracking of international ideas and images of Sweden, this article in particular examines the largely unofficial Sweden-bashing in the United States as it appeared from the horizon of Swedish public diplomats. As such, the documents reflect official Swedish concerns about the country’s reputation abroad and provide a unique probe into “published opinion” about Sweden during the second half of the Cold War.

“False” Neutrality? Sweden between East and West, North and South

No political figure in the Western world was more critical of President Nixon’s decision to resume the bombing of North Viet Nam than Sweden’s Prime Minister Olof Palme.

——Jerrold Schechter, “Sweden’s Olof Palme: ‘Neutral But Not Silent’”¹⁵

In an emotional speech in December 1972, Palme compared the US aerial attacks on Hanoi and Haiphong to the past atrocities of “Guernica, Oradour, Babi Yar, Katyn, Lidice, Sharpeville, Treblinka.”¹⁶ US President Richard Nixon, long annoyed by Sweden’s criticism, reacted sharply, limiting diplomatic contact for the coming years. While Palme’s statement appeared exaggerated and unjust to wide segments of the US public, it also resonated well with a growing American discontent with the ongoing war, especially after the release of the Pentagon Papers in June 1971. First, it came from a country that at the time was often thought of as more American than America itself—more *liberally* American, that is.¹⁷ Second, it was voiced by a person with a long-standing personal relationship with the US and a particularly strong interest in American politics since Palme’s formative studies and travels in the US in 1947-48—experiences that are often said to have set Palme in favor of “democratic socialism.”¹⁸ Palme’s statement was also in keeping with the recently adopted Swedish foreign policy doctrine of “active neutrality.” Here, Sweden emerged as a vocal and critical neutral, while its prime minister became internationally known as a representative of small states around the world, straddling the global tensions of the East-West conflict as well as the emerging North-South conflict.¹⁹

This activism also generated an unprecedented amount of attention to Sweden in general and its foreign policy in particular during the following year.²⁰ Palme repeatedly explained that his criticism simply conveyed Swedish public opinion and that Swedish neutrality had never implied silence. US observers such as *The Washington Post* for their part agreed in a sense, assuming in September 1973 that the Social Democrats’ loss of ground in the recent Swedish elections would entice Palme to increasingly turn his attention to international issues, claiming that “[t]his would cost little at home and could divert attention from domestic affairs.” More ominously, however, “[i]t could tilt Scandinavia towards the Soviet bloc.”²¹

In view of this prospect, US conservative columnists often reminded their readers of Swedish “false” neutrality during World War II, especially the transit of German troops and trade with Hitler’s Germany.²² While Swedish active neutrality in fact implied criticism of both sides in the Cold War—Palme called the communist leadership of Czechoslovakia “creatures of dictatorship” and the Spanish Franco

regime “Satanic murderers” in 1975—more moderate US observers were also taken aback by Swedish support for the Spanish Social Democrats. *The New York Times*, for example, viewed it as interference in domestic affairs, noting that “Sweden’s Prime Minister is now contributing money to Spanish opposition groups; he would cry havoc if the Shah of Iran or somebody were to help finance anti-Socialist activities in Sweden.”²³

In an effort to capitalize on the improved official relations amidst lingering negative press, Palme made a surprise unofficial visit to New York in autumn 1975, giving several interviews primarily on Swedish positions on international issues, not least for conservative and business-oriented news outlets, including the *Chicago Tribune* and *Business Week*. The visit allowed Palme to provide a more nuanced image of Swedish foreign policy in US media.²⁴ At the same time, however, US news outlets increasingly shifted their attention to domestic Swedish affairs.

“The Rich and Unhappy Swedes—What’s Troubling Them?”

The cliché about Sweden is that she has the world’s highest standard of living, income levels almost as high as the United States,²⁵ an unparalleled system of social-welfare benefits and pretty girls. The unanswered question is whether the Swedes are happy.

—Alvin Shuster, “Behind Swedish Vote: Discontent”²⁶

Since Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was considered a relatively accurate measure of societal success as well as individual satisfaction with life at the time, Sweden’s surpassing the US in this regard in July 1973 became international headline news.²⁷ Undoubtedly economically well-off, US observers began to ask, “The rich and unhappy Swedes—What’s troubling them?”²⁸ The answer was relatively straightforward: a wealthy and secure, if highly taxed and heavily regulated society led to what seemed a rather boring social life. But why would this disturb anyone else but the Swedes? US concern with Sweden was motivated, journalist Jack Star noted in his generally positive interview with Palme for *Intellectual Digest* in April 1973, as “the Sweden of yesterday is in many places the world of today.”²⁹

US conservatives shivered at this thought, and that same month, *First Monday*, a Republican publication, provided its readers with an alarming report on the power and influence of the state in Sweden, arguing that “[t]he Swedish experience” demonstrated the “wisdom of president Nixon’s determined effort to get Big Government off the backs and out of the pockets of the average American taxpayer.”³⁰ Earlier views of Sweden as the promised land of lax legislation on pornography and sexual license so popular during the 1960s no longer seemed to whip

up conservative resentment but rather to fan mild bemusement.³¹ Instead, conservative critics now identified Swedish society as predominantly “collectivistic,” somehow destructive to spiritual liberty.³² Press officers at the Swedish MFA commented drily that “This may not be a correct and objective description of today’s Sweden, but it is a serious reminder for the decision-makers’ planning of post-industrial society.”³³ If the Swedish welfare state did not make its inhabitants “happy,” what would?

As the Swedish economy and quality of life appeared solid enough, US critics soon honed in on the possibly utopian quest of improving happiness in general, and the explicit ambition of the Swedish government in strengthening economic democracy and improving labor conditions more specifically. First, because Volvo and Saab-Scania were expanding on the US market at the time, experiments with workers’ self-organization in these corporations caught American attention.³⁴ Second, a 1976 OECD report praising Swedish efforts at keeping unemployment low while controlling inflation amidst an international economic downturn proved particularly important in this regard.³⁵ Third, wage-earners funds as suggested by prominent trade union economists in Sweden sparked US interest.³⁶

While these themes had been familiar to conservative Americans since the 1950s, a more ingenious and decidedly novel form of “Sweden-bashing” emerged on the right at the same time: Swedish left-wingers had long criticized Swedish social democracy for protecting the country’s “closet capitalists”³⁷ and for its alleged hypocrisy in not embracing socialism fully. Beginning in the mid-1970s, this originally leftist critique was frequently picked up by US conservative welfare state skeptics. For example, in March 1975, the highly regarded quality magazine *Worldview*, funded by the Carnegie Council, published a lengthy article entitled “Sweden Inc. The Total Institution,” written by a certain R. H. Weber. The author, presented as “an American lawyer and writer who has lived for several years in Sweden,” explicitly proclaimed Sweden a “corporatist” state, asking inconclusively but suggestively whether the country represented a sort of “Fascism with a human face?”³⁸

This theme was also picked up by a fringe political movement of US origin that had recently established itself in Sweden, the European Labor Committees (ELC). While the ELC initially presented itself as a radical left-wing movement which only later turned to right-wing extreme positions, the Swedish left as well as Swedish media more generally viewed the organization as part of a CIA-sponsored PSYOP operation for slandering Palme and Sweden.³⁹ Whether or not these allegations can be proven, it is evident that this organization had considerable resources and made inordinate efforts specifically targeting Sweden and Palme, despite its stated goal of operating across all of Western Europe.⁴⁰ As a consequence, the ELC as well as the ELC-linked political party *Europeiska Arbetarpartiet* (EAP) attracted the interest of the Swedish security services.⁴¹

However, two entirely unexpected and apparently unpremeditated events during the election year 1976 contributed the medial tension necessary for adding the

drama and necessary human touch to this longstanding but rather abstract US criticism of Sweden: the Bergman and Lindgren affairs. In spring 1976, internationally acclaimed film and theater director Ingmar Bergman was accused of tax evasion. Simultaneously, well-known children's book author Astrid Lindgren faced an income tax bill of 102 percent. Lindgren protested by publishing a satirical "saga" in main Swedish dailies. Bergman, for his part, published an "open letter" where he declared his intent to leave Sweden, which in turn caused Palme to publicly ask Bergman to stay. Two high-profile cultural personalities had used their verbal power and international fame to criticize Swedish tax policy, and both texts were translated and reprinted in full in *The New York Times*, among other US newspapers.⁴²

These events had all the dramatic details of a "good story." For example, actress Bibi Andersson, also under investigation for tax crime, was cited in *Newsweek* as having stated that police "started to act like Nazis," claiming they "locked her in a cell, denied her the right to call her lawyer and even refused to allow her to phone her small daughter at home."⁴³ *Newsweek* speculated that Swedish cultural personalities may begin a "mass exodus," while *Time Magazine* used the Bergman affair as the point of departure for a high-profiled report on Sweden entitled "Sweden's surrealistic socialism." Both articles, published a few months before the upcoming elections in 1976 (which eventually resulted in the first electoral loss for the social democrats in 44 years), conveyed the impression that Sweden might be a utopia with regard to the social welfare of its citizens, yet it also harbored a "dark side" of surveillance and lack of respect for individual rights.⁴⁴ While the US did not provide an official statement on the shift of government in Sweden, it was widely assumed in the US press that the Ford administration was satisfied with Palme leaving office, since for years the main US criticism directed at Sweden had concerned Palme's and Sweden's allegedly "false" neutrality.⁴⁵

"Clouds of Doubt Over Sweden's Garden of Eden"

After these years of intense publicity about Sweden in the US, the press officers at the Swedish MFA tasked with keeping track of foreign opinion of Sweden registered a relative decline as well as a degree of normalization in US reporting on Sweden from 1976 to 1980.⁴⁶ In response to the 1980 Swedish referendum on nuclear power, labor market conflict and economic difficulties, US reporting picked up. US interest also focused on neutral Sweden's technology transfers to Libya and the Soviet Union as well as its attempts to sell the Saab 37 Viggen combat aircraft to four NATO countries. In the US, these reports contrasted with the largely positive view among US liberals on Sweden as a champion of disarmament.

On a more positive note, however, the MFA press officials also observed that the view of Sweden as a "model country, a social example, Utopia realized" had become more "realistic," also in the US press.⁴⁷ Exaggerations in either positive or negative directions were becoming less prevalent. Vitriolic attacks against Sweden

were mostly to be found in the Chilean and South African press, but less so in respectable US conservative publications. Simultaneously, much publicity connected to Sweden was directed at inoffensive phenomena or famous people: the Nobel Prize ceremonies, ABBA, Ingmar Bergman, Björn Borg and Ingemar Stenmark. The massive US reporting on a Soviet submarine running aground on the south coast of Sweden in 1981 contrasted with the relative decline of other reporting on Swedish themes in the preceding years.⁴⁸

The decline of negative publicity about Sweden in the US came to an end shortly after the Social Democrats returned to power in 1982.⁴⁹ However, with few exceptions, it was now Sweden’s internal conditions and its domestic policies that attracted US attention,⁵⁰ in particular issues of racism and rising xenophobia. Previously depicted as idyllic, Sweden now experienced what the international press dubbed “racial disturbances” as Swedish greasers or rockers (*raggare*) clashed with “immigrants.” US conservatives remarked ironically that Sweden had not proven itself immune to racism.⁵¹

Racism in contemporary Sweden had occasionally been reported before in international media. For example, the South African press had long hurled rather exaggerated, if not entirely unwarranted criticism at Sweden for its (earlier) discriminatory policies toward the Roma and the Saami.⁵² A novelty was the critical outlook on historical Swedish racism. In December 1984 and January 1985, international news outlets reported on pre-war research on “racial biology” as well as exclusionary post-war policies directed at ethnic minorities. Two researchers at Lund University, Richard Sotro and David Weston, had recently come across a collection of skulls at the same university. In an interview with journalist Birgitta Rubin of *Dagens Nyheter*, the two researchers provided a wide-ranging overview of past Swedish racism—harking back to Carl Linnaeus—as well as more recent discriminatory policies of the Swedish welfare state, including sterilizations and restrictive immigration policies during World War II.⁵³

Given contemporary Sweden’s reputation as a model society, this scoop on historical injustices was widely connected with the present-day welfare state through guilt by association. *The New York Times*, otherwise rather favorable to the Swedish welfare state, commented sarcastically that “Clouds of Doubt” were now gathering “Over Sweden’s Garden of Eden.” Weston was cited as saying “[t]hat Sweden should be constantly pointing at other peoples’ racism and hiding its own is a fact that can only be interpreted in the worst possible way.”⁵⁴

These revelations happened to coincide with a persistent and at times quite intensive international press campaign of criticism against the Swedish welfare state. While the concrete accusations in themselves originated with a rather small number of articles and news items, primarily on child custody and computerization of the welfare state, they soon expanded into a broader genre of criticism of Swedish society as they were picked up by news bureaus, press services, and through syndicated columns.⁵⁵ This episode also illustrates the difficulty in establishing a strict separation between

“American” and “international” publicity about Sweden, a blurring that the press officers at the Swedish MFA were acutely aware of. First, several of the key international news agencies were owned by US business interests at the time. Second, any event or scoop that made headline news in the US soon made it to global media as well. Third, main US press outlets, such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, and—above all—the *International Herald Tribune* – deliberately sought to target an “international” audience. From the point of view of Swedish public diplomacy, it was worrisome that the increasingly negative press coverage again spread from fringe publications on the extreme right, such as the ELC, to respected news outlets across the world.

“True” Socialism? Social Democracy between Capital and Labor

This development also reflected the growing presence of various anti-communist networks not only in the West more generally, but specifically among the neutral, pivotal states of Europe. Here, the sometimes shrill criticism of the Swedish welfare state played a strategic discursive role in Cold War political communication.⁵⁶ Reflecting on this development, Gösta Grassman, a press officer at the Swedish MFA, noted that these writings amounted to a new genre of “Sweden publicity” abroad. He termed this genre “the 1984 reports” due to its discursive connection between actually existing Sweden and the totalitarian society depicted in George Orwell’s dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In this reporting, the earlier assumption that the Swedish welfare state presented a specifically Swedish type of “corporatism” that in turn served as a covert form of capitalism had now been reversed into the allegation that the welfare state served as a cover for what truly amounted to socialism. The main point of the 1984 reports, Grassman observed, was to shock by reimagining a democratic, egalitarian, and prosperous Western society as “totalitarian.”⁵⁷

Four themes were particularly prominent in this reporting: the perceived lack of and tolerance extended to pluralism; a sense of a bleak future in the face of welfare state *ennui*; the chillingly impersonal efficiency of bureaucracy; and—last but not least—the Swedes’ allegedly unfaltering loyalty to the “state.”⁵⁸ Some supposedly significant scandals and subsequent statements by Swedish authors served as convenient pitchers for the 1984 reports in international media.⁵⁹ While Grassman located this shift in foreign media, above all in the US and in the west-European press more generally, the 1984 reports found their way to the Swedish press as well. In particular, Swedish dailies such as the liberal *Expressen* and conservative *Svenska Dagbladet* ran specials on the demise of the Swedish model, while the liberal *Dagens Nyheter* hosted a high-profile debate on the question “Is Sweden Totalitarian?” in summer and autumn 1982.⁶⁰

In the almost existential discussion on the character of Swedish society, politics and public life that ensued, it became increasingly difficult to distinguish the foreign reporting on Sweden and the Swedish debate on Sweden from the Swedish discussion

of the image of Sweden abroad. While these texts can be viewed as examples of legitimate international journalism or political debate in Sweden itself, they were often blown out of proportion during the autumn of 1983, both in foreign reporting on Sweden and in the Swedish reception of foreign reporting on Sweden. The amplifying, if not outright distorting, effect of transnational circulation evidently worried the Swedish MFA, which, according to *The New York Times*, “called in the foreign press corps of about 150 correspondents for a lecture on their supposedly less-than-objective articles about Sweden.” Predictably, this strategy backfired as the journalists felt curtailed.⁶¹

In another attempt by Swedish officials to “correct” the admittedly rather exaggerated images proliferating abroad, Carl Lidbom, the Swedish ambassador to France and a former Social Democratic cabinet member, wrote an open letter to Swedish author Lars Gustafsson. In an interview with a French newspaper, Gustafsson had declared his intent to leave the country due to his discomfort with Swedish bureaucracy and the rhetoric of social democracy, which in his opinion had an “aftertaste of timid fascism and vague totalitarianism.” In his letter, Lidbom ironically asked whether Gustafsson feared for his life in Sweden, while Gustafsson had complained about what he perceived as a rather limited climate for debate in that country.⁶²

In response to this somewhat perplexing intra-Swedish quarrel on the image of Sweden abroad, *The New York Times*’ reporter John Vinocur remarked, “[a] visitor to Stockholm, in truth, does not often confront Orwell’s universe.”⁶³ Others were less forgiving. *Forbes*, for example, described under the Hayek-inspired title “The road to serfdom” how the trade unions would gradually absorb all Swedish private businesses through wage earner funds, while Palme was accused of wanting to turn Sweden truly “socialist,” supposedly against the will of most Swedes.⁶⁴ One of the most influential US journalists at the time, TV commentator and syndicated columnist George Will, often returned to the 1984 theme in his frequently negative comments on Sweden and Palme.⁶⁵

This negative press in the US was taken seriously in Swedish official circles—as is evident from the official Swedish counter-reaction—mostly because it was expected to, and indeed did, affect the level of negative reporting on domestic affairs in Swedish media.⁶⁶ One response was denial. In January 1984, Sweden’s ambassador in Washington, Wilhelm Wachtmeister, claimed that Sweden enjoyed mostly positive press in the US.⁶⁷ However, Wachtmeister’s views were partially contradicted by the MFA’s press clippings that the ambassador referred to in support of his own statement.⁶⁸

Soon the often highly abstract image of Sweden as a “real life 1984” was replaced by more concrete references to Sweden as a high tax surveillance society, troubled by submarine intrusions.⁶⁹ Interestingly, the renewed relevance of NATO’s “Northern Flank” which was widely noted in the US security community and reflected in the so-called Maritime Strategy of the US Navy, did not render Swedish security

initiatives the attention, either positive or negative, they so often had attracted in the past, in sharp contrast with the 1970s.⁷⁰ With the assassination of Palme in February 1986, Sweden became the focus of global media in an unprecedented way. Over 1000 journalists gathered in early March 1986 to write about Sweden, Palme, the assassination, the murder investigation, and the funeral ceremony.⁷¹ Now Swedish society was no longer described as either utopian or dystopian in the US. It appeared, rather, as one society among others, with social and economic problems resembling those of other countries.⁷²

While Swedish right-wing extremists had followed and even outpaced their US counterparts in their hatred of Palme, Palme's disappearance from the political scene led to an increasing interest in the more generally phrased Sweden-bashing prevalent among US conservatives but previously rare within the Swedish right. Now, views of Sweden as somehow falsely neutral, under internal surveillance, overly regulated, vaguely totalitarian and truly socialist were increasingly circulated among Swedish conservatives as well as the marginal but growing ranks of Swedish neoliberals.⁷³

Conclusion

As genres, and with regard to standard content and familiar tropes, US Sweden-bashing and Swedish criticism of the welfare state gradually merged, unified by three common traits: hatred of Palme, accusations of pro-Sovietism, and alleged totalitarianism in Sweden. Typical themes were that Western social democratic political leaders of the West, including Palme, willingly or unwillingly served as Soviet influence agents; that disarmament initiatives only benefitted Soviet interests; and that totalitarian tendencies in the modern welfare state served to either prepare for outright Soviet takeover or for severing the Cold War defensive alliance between an increasingly "socialist" Europe and "liberal" America.

In the highly charged political climate of the Cold War, the image of an alternative social order that did not always play by the established rules of superpower conflict became a "conceptual irritant" to observers both left and right. Neither fish nor fowl—neither thoroughly socialist nor fully capitalist—Sweden exemplified such an alternative to progressives worldwide.⁷⁴ Hence, it also attracted critical attention from the New Left as well as flak from the Old Right. Throughout the period under study, it is primarily this specifically Swedish combination of economic prowess and supposedly socialist foreign and domestic politics that continuously drove both positive US attention and negative US criticism. However, this discourse largely failed to gain a popular touch and critical edge as long as it was primarily concerned with general social phenomena such as health, happiness, and wealth, where alarmist media reports were continuously contradicted by international rankings where Sweden sometimes bypassed the US in terms of living standard. It was only when the negative reporting could be illustrated with personal fates of well-known figures that it became persistent and seemingly irrefutable. Sweden-bashing thus emerges as a

shape-shifting, trans-boundary phenomenon in itself, resulting from the transnational circulation and intermingling of images in the interface between different transnational contexts.

In this exchange of images and ideas, US audiences and media actors played a significant role in the shift from the largely utopian image of Swedish model of the 1960s to the more dystopian image of a welfare state in decline or excess that emerged in global public opinion during the 1980s. During the Cold War, the US press not only served as an entry point for emerging global opinion. US media was also part of the global culture and information wars that trailed superpower conflict. Not only politicians, but also intelligence services sought to affect news flow, news reporting, and, ultimately, worldviews.

By “kidnapping” the left-wing criticism of Swedish social democracy and the Swedish welfare state as a covert form of capitalism, conservative critics—one of the earliest being R. H. Weber’s 1975 text cited above—could find a rhetorical entry point for attacking Swedish domestic and foreign policies. This originally leftist charge could be used as a kind of Trojan horse for right-wing criticism of Sweden, both from the US and from entrenched conservatives in Sweden itself. As marginal as these voices initially were, these themes gradually proliferated in mainstream foreign media reporting on Sweden in the early 1980s. Hence, despite its rather loose connection with factual reporting on actual social or other problems in Sweden, this negative view as expressed in, for example, the so-called 1984 reports evolved into a political reality that both critics and friends of the Swedish welfare state and its primary architects, the Swedish social democrats, had to relate to. This critical image of Sweden abroad then migrated into domestic criticism of the welfare state, where it has since proved remarkably resilient, despite considerable welfare state restructuring in response to economic crisis from the early 1990s onward.

Today, these negative images continue to enjoy a modest global circulation among conservative critics of the welfare state, alongside the mostly positive images of Sweden that dominate mainstream media, though they perhaps play a more important role in contemporary Swedish debate than in the US context where they originated. This resilience underscores a particular aspect of political communication in the age of globalization.⁷⁵ Through the prism of foreign reports, marginal actors as well as random public events may achieve a disproportionate influence. For example, domestic critics and dissidents may deliberately use transnational exchange and reflection as a means for amplifying their own societal diagnosis, as recently demonstrated by the eager adaption by Swedish right-wing extremist websites of speculative international media reporting on Swedish immigration and integration. Also, such views may, if sufficiently widespread abroad, crystallize into remarkably consistent elements of international xeno-stereotypes and—through cross-border circulation—national auto-stereotypes.⁷⁶

However, the genre of Sweden-bashing would not have had the impact it had if it did not fulfill a rhetorical role in the context where it emerged, the United States,

where transnationally circulated images of the Other could be used as a means for promoting a particular political or social agenda but also more broadly, for the formation of competitive identity, collective memory, and historical consciousness across national borders. Transnational circulation added staying power to the genre of Sweden-bashing, both at home and abroad.

Notes

¹ For US involvement in the cultural Cold War, see e.g., Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters* (New York: The New Press, 2000); Hugh Wilford, *The Mighty Wurlitzer: How the CIA Played America* (London: Harvard University Press, 2008); Peter Romijn, Giles Scott-Smith and Joes Segal, eds., *Divided Dreamworlds? The Cultural Cold War in East and West* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); for a discussion of Palme's activity as a public diplomat, see Carl Marklund, "American Mirrors and Swedish Self-Portraits: American Images of Sweden and Swedish Public Diplomacy in the USA from Olof Palme to Ingvar Carlsson," in *Histories of Public Diplomacy and Nation Branding in the Nordic and Baltic Countries*, ed. Louis Clerc, Nikolas Glover and Paul Jordan (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 172–94.

² Leif Leifland, *Frostens år: Om USA:s diplomatiska utfrysning av Sverige* (Stockholm: Nerenius & Santérus, 1997); Magnus Jerneck, "Sitting on the Balcony: American Responses, Strategic Dilemmas, and Swedish Criticism of the Vietnam War," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 24 (2013): 404–26.

³ Useful, but non-systematic, overviews include Allan Kastrup, *Med Sverige i Amerika: Opinioner, stämningar och upplysningsarbete: En rapport* (Malmö: Corona, 1985); Per T. Ohlsson, *Over there: Banden över Atlanten* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1992); Staffan Thorsell, *Sverige i Vita huset* (Stockholm: Bonnier fakta, 2004).

⁴ Carl Marklund and Klaus Petersen, "Return to Sender: American Images of the Nordic Welfare State and Nordic Welfare State Branding," *European Journal of Scandinavian Studies* 43 (2013): 244–56.

⁵ For discussions of the "Utopian trap" in the international images of Sweden, see Carl Marklund, "A Swedish Norden or a Nordic Sweden? Image Politics During the Cold War," in *Communicating the North: Media Structures and Images in the Making of the Nordic Region*, ed. Jonas Harvard and Peter Stadius (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 262–87.

⁶ For the critical reception of Huntford's book in Sweden, including Swedish conservatives, see Frederick Hale, "Brave New World in Sweden? Roland Huntford's 'The New Totalitarians,'" *Scandinavian Studies* 78 (2006): 167–90; for leading moderates' skepticism concerning adopting themes of this originally US radical right-wing critique of Sweden, as picked up by Swedish anti-communist and later right-wing extremist

Christopher Jolin, see Åke Thulstrup, “Christopher Jolin och hans kritiker,” *Svensk Tidskrift* 8 (1973): 368–73; Carl Bildt, “Christopher Jolins bok,” *Svensk Tidskrift* 9 (1973): 422.

⁷ Kristina Boréus, *Högervåg: Nyliberalismen och kampen om språket i svensk debatt 1969–1989* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1994).

⁸ For the growth of international neoliberalism, see Philip Mirowski and Dieter Plehwe, eds., *The Road from Mont Pèlerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009); for its Nordic development, see Niklas Olsen, “A Second Hand Dealer in Ideas: Christian Gandil and Scandinavian Configurations of European Neoliberalism, 1945–1970,” in *Re-Inventing Western Civilisation: Transnational Reconstructions of Liberalism in Europe in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Niklas Olsen and Hagen Schulz-Forberg (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014): 137–67.

⁹ Anders Frenander, *Debattens vågor: Om politisk-ideologiska frågor i efterkrigstidens svenska kulturdebatt* (Göteborg: Institutionen för idé- och lärdoms historia, 1998); David Brolin, *Omprövningar: Svenska vänsterintellektuella i skiftet från 70-tal till 80-tal* (Lund: Celanders, 2015).

¹⁰ Stig-Björn Ljunggren, *Folkhemskapitalismen: Högerens programutveckling under efterkrigstiden* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1992).

¹¹ Mats Johansson, *De svarta åren: Minnen från andra sidan* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1998); Sture Eskilsson, *Från folkhem till nytt klassamhälle: Ett högerspöke berättar* (Rimbo: Fischer & Co, 2005); Lars Anders Johansson, *Hatets och illviljans kolportörer: Om mediebilden av näringslivets opinionsbildning 1970–2012* (Stockholm: Timbro, 2012).

¹² The most thorough study in this field, Boréus’s abovementioned work, concludes that the “shift” was “not hegemonic,” at least not in a Gramscian sense; see Boréus, *Högervåg*, 349; for studies that consider this shift decisive, see Sven Ove Hansson, *SAF i politiken: En dokumentation av näringslivsorganisationernas opinionsbildning* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1984); Sven Ove Hansson, *Till höger om neutraliteten: Bakom fasaden hos näringslivet och moderaterna* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1985); Sven Ove Hansson and Anna-Lena Lodenius, *Operation högervridning* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1988); Stefan Koch, *Höger om! En svensk historia: 1968–98* (Stockholm: Ordfront, 1999).

¹³ See for example Erik Åsard, *Packaging Political Propaganda: Text, Context, and the Study of Political Communication* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute for North American Studies, 1996); Frank Esser and Barbara Pfetsch, eds., *Comparing Political Communication: Theories, Cases, and Challenges* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁴ Entitled *Sverige i utländsk press* [“Sweden in the Foreign Press,” hereafter referred to as SIUP] these reports were to monitor “published opinion” on Sweden abroad. [SIUP] *Sverige i utländsk press* (Stockholm: Pressbyrå, Utrikesdepartementet, 1973), 1, 58.

¹⁵ Jerrold Schechter, “Sweden’s Olof Palme: ‘Neutral But Not Silent,’” *Time Magazine*, January 29, 1973.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the “radicalization” of Swedish foreign policy in the late 1960s and early 1970s, see for example Lennart Berntson and Svante Nordin, eds., *Arvet efter 1968: Studier kring ett problemområde* (Stockholm: Axel och Margaret Ax:son Johnsons stiftelse för allmännyttiga ändamål, 2013).

¹⁷ Tom O’Dell, *Culture Unbound: Americanization and Everyday Life in Sweden* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 1997).

¹⁸ For Palme’s studies and travels in the US, for his involvement with Cold War student and trade union politics, and for subsequent visits to the US as an aide of Prime Minister Tage Erlander, see Henrik Berggren, *Underbara dagar framför oss: En biografi över Olof Palme* (Stockholm: Norstedt, 2010), 111–40, 150ff, 160, 166, 298; see also SIUP 1973, 2, 51.

¹⁹ Hans Lödén, “För säkerhets skull:” *Ideologi och säkerhet i svensk aktiv utrikespolitik 1950–1975* (Stockholm: Nerenius & Santéus, 1999); Ann-Marie Ekengren, *Av hänsyn till folkrätten? Svensk erkännandepolitik 1945–1995* (Stockholm: Nerenius & Santéus, 1999); Ulf Bjereld and Marie Demker, *Utrikespolitiken som slagfält: De svenska partierna och utrikesfrågorna* (Stockholm: Nerenius & Santéus, 1995).

²⁰ For highly critical views, see for example Victor Lasky, *San Francisco Chronicle*, January 7, 1973; *New York Daily News*, January 3, 1973; *San Francisco Examiner*, January 2, 1973. For more moderate views, see for example Alvin Shuster, “The Critical Swedes,” *New York Times*, January 12, 1973; Jerrold Schechter, “Sweden’s Olof Palme: ‘Neutral But Not Silent,’” *Time Magazine*, January 29, 1973.

²¹ *Washington Post*, September 18, 1973; see also SIUP 1973, 26, 30.

²² SIUP 1975, 20.

²³ SIUP 1975, 21.

²⁴ Bernard Weintraub, “U.S.-Swedish Relations Slowly Improving: Although Some Tension Persists,” *International Herald Tribune*, October 28, 1975; “You Have to Cry Out Loud,” *Newsweek*, November 24, 1975; see also SIUP 1975, 18.

²⁵ Gross National Income (GNI) as distinct from GDP.

²⁶ Alvin Shuster, “Behind Swedish Vote: Discontent,” *New York Times*, September 19, 1973.

²⁷ SIUP 1973, 2.

²⁸ “The Rich and Unhappy Swedes – What’s Troubling Them?” *U.S. News & World Report*, July 30, 1973.

²⁹ Jack Star, “IN PASSAGE/OLOF PALME. Freedom and socialism are alive and well in Sweden, says Prime Minister Olof Palme,” *Intellectual Digest* 3 (April 1973).

³⁰ See also SIUP 1975, 43; “Henry J. Taylor Says: Palme Prisoner Of Communists,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 6, 1975.

³¹ SIUP 1975, 3.

³² SIUP 1973, 15.

³³ SIUP 1973 15; see also discussion in Dag Sebastian Ahlander and Bo Kjellén, *Sverige sett utifrån: Reflexioner från några svenskar i utrikestjänst* (Stockholm: Projektgruppen Sveriges internationella villkor, Sekretariatet för framtidsstudier, 1976).

³⁴ SIUP 1973, 32.

³⁵ SIUP 1976, 4, 6.

³⁶ SIUP 1976, 10.

³⁷ Robert L. Bartley, “Sweden: The Closet Capitalists,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 5, 1975; see also SIUP 1976, 7.

³⁸ R. H. Weber, “Sweden Inc. The Total Institution: Order, unity, nationalism, security: Fascism with a human face?,” *Worldview* 18 (1975): 20–30; on the identity of the author, assumed by the Swedish MFA to have been an American Vietnam War deserter, see SIUP 1975, 44.

³⁹ For Swedish media reporting on the establishment of the European Labour Committees (ELC) in Sweden, see *Dagens Nyheter*, October 24, 1975; *Aftonbladet*, October 13, 1975; *Aftonbladet*, October 14, 1975; *Aftonbladet*, August 2, 1976.

⁴⁰ Håkan Hermansson and Lars Wenander, *Uppdrag: Olof Palme: Hatet, jakten, kampanjerna* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1987); Karl N. Alvar Nilsson, *Ondskan, hatet, mordet: Utrett och outrett – mordet i ett politiskt sammanhang* (Stockholm: Hjalmarson & Högberg, 2002).

⁴¹ On the surveillance of the EAP, see Magnus Hjort, *Hotet från vänster: Säkerhetstjänsternas övervakning av kommunister, anarkister m.m. 1965–2002* (Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer, 2002), 267–304; Lars Olof Lampers, *Det grå brödrskapet: En berättelse om IB* (Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer, 2002), 336; see also *Övervakningen av nazister och högerextremister: Forskarrapporter till Säkerhetstjänstkommissionen* (Stockholm: Fritzes offentliga publikationer, 2002), 101–6.

⁴² SIUP 1976, 15.

⁴³ Angus Deming and Malcolm MacPherson, “Utopia’s Dark Side,” *Newsweek*, May 3, 1976.

⁴⁴ SIUP 1976, 17.

⁴⁵ SIUP 1976, 47.

⁴⁶ SIUP 1976, 1; SIUP 1980, 64. During this period, furthermore, EAP’s public activities in Sweden appeared to decline while the reporting on Sweden and criticism of Palme in the LaRouche movement’s flagship publication *Executive Intelligence Review* decreased. Also

Swedish intelligence services reduced their surveillance of the EAP and its activities. See Hjort, *Hotet från vänster*, 295.

⁴⁷ SIUP 1978, 20–21.

⁴⁸ SIUP 1981, 44.

⁴⁹ SIUP 1982, 77.

⁵⁰ However, alleged submarine incidents and transfers of computers to the Soviet Union during autumn 1983 and spring 1984 gained widespread attention in the US, underscoring Sweden's, and hence US, security concerns with regard to Sweden's proximity to the Soviet Union. SIUP 1983, 21.

⁵¹ SIUP 1982, 79. The significance of these concerns may be warranted by the appointment in 1978 of a special commission studying the problem of discrimination in Sweden; see Dir. 1978:78, *Kommittédirektiv, Utredning om fördomar och diskriminering i fråga om invandrare m. fl.*

⁵² See for example SIUP 1977, 2; SIUP 1979, 60; for an earlier discussion on this topic, see Evert Kumm, *Zigenare och vanliga svenskar: Fakta om en s.k. raskonflikt* (Örebro: förf., 1965), 7.

⁵³ Birgitta Rubin, "Svensk rasism göms på vind," *Dagens Nyheter*, November 27, 1984; see also *Sydsvenskan*, November 28, 1984; Birgitta Rubin, "Linnés antropologiska galenskaper," *Dagens Nyheter*, December 3, 1984; David Weston and Richard Sotto, "Forskningen var rasistisk," *Dagens Nyheter*, December 28, 1984.

⁵⁴ John Vinocur, "Clouds of Doubt Over Sweden's Garden of Eden," *New York Times*, January 2, 1985; see also SIUP 1984, 109. For academic treatments on emerging Swedish racism and xenophobia, see Allan Pred, *Even in Sweden: Racisms, Racialized Spaces, and the Popular Geographical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000); Dennis S. Nordin, *A Swedish Dilemma: A Liberal European Nation's Struggle with Racism and Xenophobia, 1990–2000* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005).

⁵⁵ SIUP 1983, 2.

⁵⁶ Giles Scott-Smith, *Western Anti-Communism and the Interdoc Network: Cold War Internationale* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵⁷ SIUP 1983, 44.

⁵⁸ Discomfort with bureaucracy and standardization had been a longstanding theme in the literary and cultural criticism of the Swedish welfare state—often from the left—during the 1960s and 1970s and gradually evolved into a central element in Swedish literary production during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which could also be connected with "liberal" values. See Inge Jonsson, *Maktens verktyg: Byråkrater och politiker i nutida svensk samhällsskildring* (Stockholm: LiberFörlag i samarbete med Delegationen för långsiktssmotiverad forskning, 1978).

⁵⁹ See for example John Vinocur, “Swedes Say Bureaucracy Winning Out Over Fairness: After So Much Social Change, the Drive for Perfection Now Creates as Many Difficulties as Benefits,” *New York Times*, November 25, 1983; see also SIUP 1983, 46–47.

⁶⁰ German critic Hans Magnus Enzensberger—who visited Sweden in early autumn 1982 at the invitation of *Dagens Nyheter*—also commented upon the prevalence of these critical accounts of Sweden, both in the international and the domestic press, noting their often shrill, sometimes even hysterical tone. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Svensk höst* (Stockholm: Dagens Nyheter, 1982), 26–27; see also discussion in Frenander, *Debattens vågor*, 228–33.

⁶¹ Vinocur, “Swedes Say”; see also Samuel G. Perry, “Well-educated or brainwashed Orwell-style?” *International Herald Tribune*, November 29, 1983.

⁶² Carl Lidbom, “Är ditt liv i fara?” *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 15, 1983. For the debate on the image of Sweden abroad, see Urban Andersson, “Tugget om skräcklandet,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, November 28, 1983; Ingmar Björkstén, “En (s)vensk demokrat,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, December 7, 1983; Elisabeth Frankl, “Sverige slagträ i olika länders inrikespolitik – men visst har vi gått för långt i en massa detaljer,” *Expressen*, December 19, 1983.

⁶³ Vinocur, “Swedes Say.”

⁶⁴ Rosemary Brady, “The road to serfdom,” *Forbes*, November 1, 1983.

⁶⁵ SIUP 1983, 69.

⁶⁶ According to contemporary media researchers, so-called “misery reporting” (*eländesrapportering*) became increasingly prevalent in Swedish media during the course of the 1980s; see Jörgen Westerståhl and Folke Johansson, *Bilden av Sverige: Studier av nyheter och nyhetsideologier i TV, radio och dagspress* (Stockholm: Studieförb. Näringsliv och samhälle (SN&S), 1985), 80ff.

⁶⁷ Wilhelm Wachtmeister, “Kritiskt om bankkö och taxi – annars är allt bara bra...,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, January 3, 1984; see also discussion in Carl Michael Lindh, “Högern och Sverige bilden: Något om dagens svenska höger och dess roll i Sverige bildsdebatten 1983–84” (Stockholm: Stockholms universitet, Kulturvetarlinjen, 1984), 29–30.

⁶⁸ Bertil Östergren, “Totalitära krav på Sverige bilden,” *Svenska Dagbladet*, January 7, 1984; Lindh, *Högern och Sverige bilden*, 30.

⁶⁹ Stephen D. Moore, “The Exodus Swells of Sweden’s Tax-Weary Rich,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 1985; see also SIUP 1984, 4, 72–73. In response to the submarines, the *Wall Street Journal* proposed that Sweden should join NATO in order to gain credibility for its “neutrality policy.” SIUP 1984, 34–35.

⁷⁰ Lucy Komisar, “Sweden’s Palme continues tilt at nuclear windmill,” *San Diego Union*, December 25, 1984; for a similar view based upon a more systematic analysis of US

official statements, see Ingemar Dörfer, *Nollpunkten: Sverige i det andra kalla kriget 1979–1986* (Stockholm: Stockholm: Timbro, 1991).

⁷¹ SIUP 1986, 1.

⁷² SIUP 1986, 3, 35.

⁷³ Among Swedish public intellectuals who took up these themes, without being right-wing radicals, we find noted authors such as Sven Delblanc, Lars Gustafsson and Sven Fagerberg; see discussion in Frenander, *Debattens vågor*. Examples of early right-wing Swedish welfare state criticism relying upon these themes include Christopher Jolin, *Vänstervridningen: Hot mot demokratin i Sverige* (Malmö: Vox/Bernce, 1972); Nikolaj-Klaus von Kreitor, *Monologer i exil: En självbiografisk kritik av den reellt existerande korporativismen i Sverige* (Stockholm: [N. Kreitor], 1979); Lennart Hane, *Laglöshet genom lagstiftning: Den svenska vägen till totalitarismen* (Stockholm, 1984); Fredrik Braconier and Lars Christiansson, *Vem värnar Sverige? Striden om svensk säkerhetspolitik* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1985); Charlie Nordblom, *Krig i fredstid: Sovjets offensiv mot Norden* (Stockholm: Timbro, 1988); Jacob Sundberg, *Political Crime: Persecution and Swedish High Tax Society* (Stockholm: Stockholm Institute of Public and International Law, 1988). For discussions of this phenomenon more generally, see Lindh, *Högern och Sverige bilden*; Hermansson and Wenander, *Uppdrag: Olof Palme*.

⁷⁴ This particular quality of Sweden in past international debates was specifically noted when Swedish public diplomacy for the 1990s was being planned; see Presstjänstutredningen, *UD:s presstjänst: Betänkande från Presstjänstutredningen* (Stockholm: Allmänna förlaget, 1989), 70.

⁷⁵ Cf. Esser and Pfetsch, *Comparing Political Communication*.

⁷⁶ For a discussion of the concepts of auto-stereotypes and xeno-stereotypes, see Kazimierz Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian model: Images of progress in the era of modernisation* (Baden-Baden: Nomos-Verl.-Ges., 2002).