

Better Red than Dead

– Remembering Cold War Sweden

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Introduction

During a conference lunch at Södertörn University, Irina is talking with Irena Grudzinska-Gross about life in Poland during the Soviet era. All of a sudden, Irina concludes that the protests against the regime in Poland and other East European countries could be understood as the politics of fun, which suggests that life was boring. The latest trend in the Swedish film industry is to picture Sweden during the 1970s. I think that the filmmakers have got it all wrong. Life in Sweden during the Cold War was extremely dull and boring, and not fun at all. It therefore seems to me that nostalgia in general is based on a boring past rather than on a glorious past.

Remembering

Remembering, memory, and memory studies are not an easy theme. In “*Entre mémoire et histoire: La problématique des lieux de mémoire*”, Pierre Nora explains a few for this essay important things.¹ He writes that as soon as there are traces, distance and agency, we do not exist anymore in true memory but in history. This also implies, according to Nora, that history and memory are opposites. We carry memories, but we construct history. He also underscores that our need for memories is at the same time a need for history. I would stress that what I am about to explore is on the one hand my personal need to remember, but at the same time I am probably also constructing history. What is interesting here is Nora’s focus on the archive and his long discussion about the need to collect everything in archives. For me to be able to remember I need the archive—not to remember, but to make sure that I am remembering and not making things up. Nora explains that because of the politics of memory, everyone has become an historian, and the turn from the history of memory to the politics of memory has multiplied the number of private memories each demanding its own history. This suggests that we no longer talk about origins. Instead we talk about lineage or heritage. What Nora expresses in his text is a critical study of what we today understand as heritage and memory, often used in political discourse

and critically examined in heritage and memory studies. I understand that I am on my way into a field that is not at all unproblematic, an issue touched upon by Aleida Assmann in “Kollektives Gedächtnis und kulturelle Identität”.² In her essay, Assmann argues against those that have criticized memory studies. Nevertheless, as far as I can see, she has problems taking memory studies beyond what Nora describes above. I would like to suggest that this multiplication of private memories is the foundation for identity politics. What the problem tends to be, from my horizon at least, is that memory is always connected with identity and lineage and therefore with identity and heritage politics.

In his essay “Between Worlds”, Edward Said strongly argued against identity politics and nationalism:

Identity as such is as boring a subject as one can imagine. Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum-beating nationalism, and so on. We have to defend peoples and identities threatened with extinction or subordinated because they are considered inferior, but that is very different from aggrandizing a past invented for present reasons.³

On the other hand, Assmann can clearly show that memories are important, for they exist as personal or collective memories—people, groups, organizations, authorities and even governments talk about what has once happened, not as something in a historical past, but as something engaging in the present.

It is in the walls

There is an expression in Swedish “Det sitter i väggarna”—literally “it sits in the walls”. What exists in the walls is a ghost from earlier days, a tradition unknown to the present but still there. The walls hold on to a memory that haunts the present and forces, for example the staff at a museum, to repeat what their predecessors had done before them.

We often say that if only the walls of an old house or the old trees in the forest could talk, they would tell us stories about the past. The trees, like the walls, carry secret memories of the past within them. The same goes for old objects—if they only could talk.

We could argue that such stories can also be found in society. I would like to suggest that the Cold War is present in Swedish society, but it is hidden, like the memories we believe are concealed in old trees, old objects and old

houses—it is “in the walls”. Remembering Cold War Sweden is not a memory project, however, because I am not attempting to unfold memories that must be unfolded for different reasons. What I am aiming at is to understand the effect that the Soviet Union had on Sweden through my own, mostly banal, memories from the time. These recollections are not important to me or my identity. They are not traumatic, nor have I been under any form of oppression, but they do exist and they do point in certain directions. In a broader sense, no memories are important, yet they are significant nevertheless. So the direction I will take is to explore such unimportant important memories.

Introducing the Foreign Minister

Two months before the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, Swedish Foreign Minister Sten Andersson declared that the Baltic States were not and had never been occupied by the Soviets. This statement had its roots in a 1947 declaration by the Swedish government that Sweden would accept the Soviet annexation of the Baltic States. Sweden did this contrary to international laws and conventions. The question “why” is of course central, but I have not been able to find a clear explanation. Instead there exist many different reasons for these politics.⁴ One is Sweden’s desire to be neutral. I accept that, because the will to be neutral would shape Swedish policies toward not only the Soviet Union until its fall in 1989, but also Swedish society and the everyday life of its citizens.

After the fall of the Iron Curtain, international research has, broadly speaking, focused on two things: Soviet oppression in the Baltic States, East Europe and, of course in Russia, and the post-Soviet period in these same countries. It goes without saying that this focus is incontestable and deeply needed. But I think it is time that we also focus on the western parts of Europe. The way of life, politics, culture in any form, and so on, were affected by the very existence of the Soviet Union. It had a grip on our minds and being that went beyond more apparent things such as the threat of a nuclear war, official political debates and so forth. We lived in a bizarre shadow of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union was there, and could maybe perhaps or even probably be described as the uncanny other, a strange image in the mirror affecting our minds and bodies, without us being able to more explicitly describe its impact. We could always condemn it, try to understand it, embrace it or even glorify it, but at the end of the day, it slipped out of our hands

but was still there as something on the side, in the corner of our eye, a strange image in the mirror, or the uncanny other.

Family stories

I have no memory of the 1962 Cuba crisis, but it affected me indirectly as a small child. When a university student in the mid-1950s, my father spent a year in the United States, where he and an American veteran of the Korean War became close friends. When the crisis began my father's friend and his wife were convinced that Sweden would come under heavy pressure from the Soviets and concluded that they must help my father and his family. According to our family story, they went so far as to arrange a house for us and a job for my father.

The first memory

In the beginning of the 1970s, my family and I travelled from New Delhi to Moscow. We flew with Aeroflot, the Soviet airline, on our way home to Sweden from the Indian capital, where my father was stationed as the head of SIDA, the Swedish International Development Agency. Having already had some experience of flying, it was strange to be onboard an Aeroflot flight. Everything was similar but at the same time different from airlines I had flown on before, such as SAS (Scandinavian Airlines), Air France, Air India, British Airways or even PIA (Pakistan International Airlines), where the captain always ended his talk to us onboard with the word *Inshallah*.

Upon our arrival, we ventured out into the city and soon found what we already knew: the lack of food and consumer goods. The most shocking experience for a 12-year old boy like me, who had been raised in a liberal family and spent some time in American schools, however, was the Lenin Mausoleum, although not Lenin himself or the absurdity of having his dead body on display. I still remember waiting outside and watching the soldiers parade in front of the building, and I remember even more clearly entering it and going down some stairs together with my father. When I whispered something to him, a soldier standing in the shadows shouted at me. Although I didn't know a word of Russian, it was clear that I was not supposed to speak in the building. When we stood on Red Square after the visit I asked my father who was making the most noise, the soldier or me? My father looked at me and said: "The soldier, but that's not the point".

The scar

On my left leg, from my buttock down to my knee, there is a broad scar. The Cold War indirectly put it on my body. It is from my time in the military, where every young man was forced to serve. There were only four options: do it with arms, do it without arms, go to jail, or be declared psychologically unfit, which many thought was the best option.

Objects

I have tried to remember any everyday object that was directly connected with the Cold War and that therefore would not have existed were it not for the Cold War, but I have not been able to find any. On the other hand, many things that we used might indirectly have had something to do with it.

Here I recall a strange object: the can opener. Everyone had one, and they were very functional. But during the 70s a new and fancy opener turned up on the market. You could fasten it on the wall or use it by hand. The point was that all you needed to do was to fasten the can on it and turn a handle. It was very difficult to use compared to the small one, but you could find it in most homes. It was a stupid technical innovation, because the little opener worked perfectly. What this new gadget might have stressed was that the West was much more technically advanced than the Soviet Union, but I would not be surprised if the same item existed there as well.

And there was that special beer bottle called Rigello, a plastic container and paper sleeve that was supposed to be biodegradable and would disappear by itself if it was thrown away in the forest. What at least I did was to collect the caps and create meandering lines by putting them together.

I'm probably wrong, but I believe that the purpose of many objects developed for the market during the 1970s, for example, was to mark a technical distance to the Soviet Union. Things should be made in America or at least have some fresh technological American aura.

Arriving home

Flying around the world was always an interesting experience, especially when I returned to Sweden. Sweden joined the EU in 1995, but before that the country was rather closed, and during the Cold War its borders were strictly monitored. I recall two emotional memories: one, the freshness of the SAS airliners and the positive, clean, almost pure solitude of Swedish society, and two, the exact opposite of this positive privateness, the stone-faced

customs officials and boring, almost gray Swedish society. A beautiful sunny summer day could all of a sudden become completely gray even if the weather had not changed.

Hopeless discussions

Drunk, or getting drunk, mostly from beer in Rigello bottles, we could go on and on discussing communism and the Soviet Union. Such discussions always ended with the comment, “but what about the US!?” Today this is called “whataboutism”.

East European trips

In 1980, during the turbulence around Solidarność—the independent self-governing trade union “Solidarity”—movement, I travelled to Poland and other East European countries together with my girlfriend at the time, who was deeply interested in the fate of the East European Jews. There was an obvious political difference between these countries which caught my attention. In Poland, for example, exchanging money on the black market was no problem, but it was rather pointless because there was nothing to buy. In Hungary there were western-style discos, and exchanging money on the black market was also pointless, not because there was nothing to buy, but because there was hardly any difference between the official exchange rate and what you got on the black market. The atmosphere was also very relaxed in Hungary compared to the atmosphere in Czechoslovakia, where police with Kalashnikovs patrolled the train stations and it was even dangerous to exchange money on the black market. Scared of being caught, we were tricked and lost our money to the black-marketeers.

Taking a stand

In 1990, a friend of mine and I took part in a small demonstration outside the Russian Embassy in Stockholm against Russian aggression in Estonia prior to the country’s independence in 1991.

The banality of remembrance

I agree that my examples above are banal or even insignificant compared with the stories told by those who experienced the oppression. They are

probably not even fully and correctly described, but they would not have existed were it not for the Soviet Union, and that is my point.

I do not believe that such memories are unique to me. Is there such a thing as what Maurice Halbwachs calls a collective memory? Multiplied, in any case, such recollections form a pattern throughout a society that is now gone but once existed in a very strange in-between situated amid a sort of depressing gloominess and brightly lit sunshine, emotions that are not facts or metaphors, but a consequence of something in the corner of our eye—a strange image in the mirror, a border, a dream, and at the same time a reality, a situation impossible to grasp; a secret, a trembling and frightened society, which Sweden was during the years of the Cold War. The key concept in Swedish politics during these days was accordingly “trygghet”. Translating the word “trygghet” into English is a bit tricky, but “freedom from danger” might be pretty close. Freedom from danger meant restrictions on one’s freedom, which is connected with Sweden’s neutrality. In this case, neutrality means to be “the border”, and strangely enough, it is the border between the metaphors of “gloominess” and “brightness”, the USSR and the USA, both feared because of their lack of “trygghet” – freedom from danger! And as I recall in one of my memories, returning to Sweden was always a paradox between the bright and the gray, but at the same time it was a return to a world outside the world, a world framed away from the world, an in-between world, if that is possible, which is the regime of freedom from danger. This regime was thus a consequence of the Soviet Union. “Freedom from danger” can also be described as what Nina Witoszek calls the state of being “gratefully oppressed”.⁵ Were we during the Cold War in such need of freedom from danger that we gratefully accepted being oppressed? Perhaps, because freedom from danger does have a price, as do all forms of freedom. This statement needs an explanation or an answer to the question of what oppression implies. In what way were we oppressed? We were gratefully oppressed by the ideology or the regime of freedom from danger. It all had to do with the negotiated price we paid to be free from danger, which means that we put our Being in the hands of the State and sold our soul to boredom.

Better Red than Dead

The first part of my title reads “Better Red than Dead” (in Swedish, “Hellre röd än död”). This statement could be found written on walls in Stockholm during the 1970s and 1980s. What it implies is obvious: it is better to be dom-

inated by the Soviet Union than to be killed in a nuclear war. How is it possible that people could take such a stand at the same time as people on the other side of the Iron Curtain were being killed, not by a nuclear war, but by the Soviet regime? The statement is actually a comment on another standpoint that also flourished – “Better Dead than Red”. What this implies is an extremely polarized society in which one part is “better dead than red” and another is “better red than dead”. These two viewpoints are of course based on two political positions, left and right, one pacifistic and one militaristic. The polarization can, however, be interpreted as something very national and without any clear reference to the Soviet Union as such. What it suggests is a conflict inside the society between people drawn to leftist politics and those drawn to more right-wing, center-right or even Social-democratic politics. Left-wing views could of course not be discarded, if only because of the reality of the Soviet Union. They certainly could exist on their own regardless of the country, but many left-wing politicians and voters embraced or even glorified the Soviet Union. Many on the center-right, the Social Democrats, and, of course, those farther to the right rejected all left-wing politics due to the simple fact that the Soviet Union existed.

What I want to point to here, however, is not what people thought, but the divide that resulted from the uncanniness and incomprehensibility that the Soviet Union generated. It is this uncertainty that creates bizarre statements such as “better dead than red” or “better red than dead”, which in turn gives rise to hopeless “whataboutism”.

Suicide

I remember that we used to say that during the Cold War Sweden had the highest suicide rate in the world. To check my memories, I contacted *The National Centre for Suicide Research and Prevention of Mental Ill-Health*. They directed me to an article published by Radio Sweden. Here I discovered that it was actually the American president Dwight Eisenhower who created this myth, which came to be more or less accepted. According to the article, Eisenhower stated that “‘sin, nudity, drunkenness and suicide’ in Sweden were due to welfare policy excess.” This would prove to be “fake news”. Sweden did have many suicides during the Cold War, but when compared with other countries that compiled accurate statistics, Sweden was among the average nations. But in 1980, the suicide rate in Sweden was twice as high as it is 2018.⁶ This still implies that Sweden during the time of “freedom from

danger” had a higher rate of suicides compared to the years that followed the Cold War, which is an interesting paradox.

I was radicalized by the Beatles

In the late 1960s, I was a young boy living in a very posh yet rather liberal suburb not far from Stockholm. In this context the 1968 movement had a special impact. It was something going on at a distance, but I believe it also involved some threat to people in my community. Without understanding it, of course, we kids saw it as some sort of fresh freedom opportunity. Inspired by the Beatles, we boys let our hair grow. This was not seen as something deeply problematic, but it did have its impact on the older generation of grandparents, and in some cases also on parents, when, for example our hair grew so long that it started to cover our eyes. The year 1968 is a very strange one for many reasons. I was too young to have any memories beyond my long hair and the feeling of freedom. The year includes a paradox, namely the aspect of freedom. My eight-year old person could feel this possibility, but freedom from what? As I understand it today, it was about freedom from the “freedom from danger”. So many things happened in 1968, which makes it a very strange time. Let me mention a few examples. Martin Luther King was shot dead. In Mexico hundreds of people were killed while demonstrating. In Paris, Stockholm, Warsaw and Prague people demonstrated. The Soviet war machine invaded Czechoslovakia. What was it all about? There is no core answer to the question. In Paris and Stockholm, university students demonstrated against the political system, as did university students in Prague and Warsaw. I grew long hair. Could it be so simple that the whole issue was about freedom from “the freedom from danger”, a freedom that had a price everywhere in the world, but mostly in the post-World War II welfare society, a society that was not only under construction in the West, but was also being built in the East? Were the political systems on both sides of the Iron Curtain creating societies that oppressed their people in the name of “trygghet”, the freedom from danger? Based on my memories, at least, the price paid was boredom. The freedom-from-danger-society was boring. Is this an overly simplistic explanation? Maybe. But did the seventies not also come with the politics of fun?⁷ The hippie movement, the discos—was this not a question of having fun? And to be able to have fun we must free ourselves from the oppressing political power of the “freedom from danger”. When I lived in India during the 70s, I wanted to become a hippie as I grew up, because it looked like they had fun and were free. I did not become

a hippie, because after a while I started to despise them. Here they were in India, dressed in rags, using drugs and actually exploiting the country and its people for their own personal needs and desires, people who were dressed in clean clothes, working hard and many times living under awful conditions. The hippie movement, or rather the Western hippies in India, were an insult to the Indian people, I soon concluded. This memory is still very strong. Nevertheless, 1968 and what followed could still be understood as a reaction against the regime of “freedom from danger” and its social and political consequences, or at least it can be remembered as such.

Different views, different memories

I stated above that we could always condemn the Soviet Union, try to understand it, embrace it or even glorify it, but at the end of the day it would slip out of our hands yet remain there as something on the side, in the corner of our eye, a strange image in the mirror or the uncanny other.

What this might imply is that we are talking about different memories and therefore about different “epistemic communities”, based on the notion of “episteme” that Foucault employs to explain systems of thought. Today the term “epistemic communities” is often used in political and social science to refer to a group of professionals who think in a similar manner. In my case, epistemic communities might explain the everyday Swede’s understanding of the Soviet Union. As mentioned above, the Soviet Union could not be understood as a core phenomenon by anyone. Instead, different perceptions emerged. Each such understanding might be described as an epistemic community that disseminated information throughout the society. Remember the so-called “Kremlologists”, observers who tried to figure out what was going on in the Kremlin? To be able to orientate themselves in such a situation, and, given the position of Swedish neutrality, the Swedish people had to build epistemic communities in which they could find some sort of common and collective meaning. But, as I have stated, at the end of the day the chosen episteme would probably not have much meaning. That is not the point in this case, however. The point is that Swedes like myself needed an orientation in circumstances that were impossible to understand, and each of us found ourselves attached to an epistemic community that was based on a common and collective explanation and understanding of the situation during the Cold War. One example is what I discussed above: so-called “whataboutism”. Throwing the question or even the statement “what-about!” at one’s opponent indicates the existence of different epistemic

standpoints. This could mean that remembering Cold War Sweden is today based on which “episteme” one found understandable. This suggests memories leading in many different directions, which might imply that the whole issue of remembering Cold War Sweden actually is a question of identity.

Conclusion

I must again underscore that what I have discussed above are reflections. It is not a trauma. It has nothing to do with violence. It is rather the opposite—freedom from danger. Maybe it all has to do with the memory of safety, the idea of a world free from all forms of danger. Maybe the project had a similar agenda in the West and in the East. In the East, freedom from danger led to oppression. In the West, freedom from danger led to depression.

In a society that is free from danger, the politics of freedom from danger is obsolete. The fall of the Wall and the end of the Cold War was according Fukuyama the End of History, but as we have seen today, that was not the case.⁸ Should we maybe instead understand the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Wall as the end of the politics and regime of freedom from danger, in both the East and the West?

The question points to the present. “It’s a dangerous world”, President Trump has stated. The question is who makes it dangerous, and if it is dangerous, to whom. To males, according to Trump. Probably not. Is it time to return to the politics and regime of freedom from danger, or should we maybe instead invent a new global strategy – the politics of fun – that frees us all from danger? The answer to the question lies beyond my memories.

¹ Swedish translation by Anna Petronella Foultier and published in *Mellan minne och glömska: studier i det kulturella minnets förvandlingar*, Johan Redin and Hans Ruin, eds. (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2016), 77–111.

² Swedish translation by Peter Handberg and published in *Mellan minne och glömska: studier i det kulturella minnets förvandlingar*, Johan Redin and Hans Ruin, eds. (Göteborg: Daidalos, 2016), 121–44.

³ Edward Said, “Between Worlds”, *Reflections of Exile: & Other Literary & Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2012), 567.

⁴ <http://palwrange.blogspot.com/2011/12/var-de-baltiska-staterna-ockuperade.html>, accessed January 5 2019.

⁵ Nina Witoszek, “Moral Community and the Crisis of the Enlightenment: Sweden and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s” in Nina Witoszek and Lars Trägårdh, eds., *Culture and Crisis: The Case of Germany and Sweden* (New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2002), 68

⁶ <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=2054&artikel=5924063>, accessed November 28 2018

⁷ Thank you, Irina, for always finding these brilliant twists on things.

⁸ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992).