White melancholia

Mourning the loss of "Good old Sweden"

Tobias Hübinette, Catrin Lundström
18 October 2011

Sweden's post-war image as frontrunner of egalitarianism and antiracism contains more than a trace of national and racial chauvinism, argue two whiteness studies scholars. As myths of the better Sweden fade, both Right and Left are consumed by "white melancholy".

Sweden’s 2010 election brought the racist Sweden Democrats into the national parliament for this first time. Post-election discussions and analyses have tended to explain the presence of a racist party in the Swedish parliament as a reflection of dissatisfaction among certain voter segments, without taking into account any analysis of issues of race and whiteness. At the same time, there has been an eruption of official antiracism among the elites and within the Swedish establishment.

However, a critical analysis of post-election Sweden in terms of race and whiteness has not been heard. Why not? How are we to understand the fact that whiteness and white privileges are maintained in a country ruled by progressive social policies, democratisation projects, gender equality and official antiracism?

We argue that Sweden is currently undergoing a double crisis of Swedish whiteness. “old Sweden”, i.e. Sweden as a homogeneous society, and “good Sweden”, i.e. Sweden as a progressive society, are both perceived to be threatened by the presence of non-white migrants and their descendants. Both the reactionary and racist camp and the progressive and antiracist camp are mourning the loss of this double-edged Swedish whiteness.

We also argue that our analysis of Swedish whiteness is also applicable to the situations in neighbouring Scandinavian countries, particularly to Norway after the Utøya massacre, which has prompted similar reactions to those in Sweden after the 2010 election.

The foundations of Swedish whiteness

In contemporary Sweden, the idea of being white constitutes the central core and master
signifier of Swedishness, and thus of being Swedish. A Swede is a white person and a non-white person is not a Swede. In other words, within the Swedish national imaginary the difference between the genetic concept of race and the cultural concept of ethnicity has collapsed completely: whiteness is Swedishness and Swedishness is whiteness.

The conflation of race and ethnicity and the equivalence of Swedishness with whiteness is not only encountered by non-white migrants and their descendants, but also by adopted and mixed Swedes of colour with South American, African or Asian backgrounds. In spite of being more or less fully embedded within Swedishness on an ethnic, linguistic, religious and cultural level, these people experience racializing practices as a result of their “non-Swedish” bodies. [1]

The historical construction of Swedishness can be traced to the pre-eminence of the Swedes, along with the Norwegians and Danes, in the construction of the white race as the elite of *homo sapiens*. In a scientific discourse hegemonic for almost 200 years, the Swedes and other Scandinavians were considered the most physically and aesthetically perfect people on earth. [2]

The nation’s scholars excelled in and contributed substantially to racial science: Carl Linnaeus created the first modern scientific system for race classification in the mid-1700s; Anders Retzius invented the skull or cephalic index – which became the principal method for racial science itself – in the 1850s; and the Swedish government founded the Swedish Institute for Racial Biology in 1922. [3] In the mid 1930s, Sweden also installed one of the most effective sterilization programs ever, a eugenicist project that was both racialized, heteronormative, gendered and classed, and that affected more than 60 000 Swedes before being dissolved in the mid-1970s. [4]

However from the 1960s and 1970s, Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries arguably became the leading (western) voice and (white) supporter of decolonisation and anti-colonial, anti-segregation and anti-apartheid movements. In the process, the world’s most radical proponent of social justice and gender equality transformed racism into a non-Swedish issue.

In a feat of national branding, “good Sweden” was promoted as more tolerant and liberal than any other (western) country and (white) people in the world. One result was, for example, that Swedes have adopted proportionally the most children of colour from former colonies than any other western country; or that Swedes have entered into interracial marriages and relationships more frequently than other western nations. Sweden imagined itself as a non-racist and post-racial utopia with no colonial past.

Swedish concepts of whiteness have developed since Sweden became a country of immigration. In everyday life, in the public sphere and in political discourse, people belonging to the 8 per cent of the total population with origins in a non-European, postcolonial or “Third World” country in Asia, Africa or South America are categorized as “immigrants”, “foreigners” and “non-Swedes”, and often as non-Christian or at least non-Lutheran.

Immigrants from non-western countries began to arrive in Sweden and Scandinavia in small numbers in the 1950s, and then in larger numbers in the second half of the 1970s.
and particularly the 1980s and onwards, when refugee immigration took over from labour immigration. Not coincidentally, this is also when integration started to be described as a “failed” project. Since the 1990s, non-white and non-Christian immigrants have dominated immigration to Sweden.

When it comes to the discrimination of migrants and their descendants, particularly non-white and non-European groups, Sweden barely differs from any other western country today. Particularly when it comes to housing, Sweden stands out for its highly racialized patterns of residential segregation.

Against this historical background, notions of Swedish whiteness evolved alongside the image of Sweden developed during the Cold War, decolonization and the social revolution of 1968: that of Sweden as paradise on earth and utopia for human rights, democracy, gender equality and antiracism, where race as concept and as category has been rendered irrelevant and obsolete.

The expanding boundaries of whiteness

Whiteness is a pivotal concept for analysing the recent Swedish election. Swedish whiteness includes racists as well as antiracists, and ultimately all Swedes, regardless of political views. Swedish whiteness is similar to the hegemonic whiteness that Matthew Hughey analyses in his interviews with white antiracists and white racists in the US, which reveal, beyond ideological statements, many similarities in terms of white perspectives and privileges. [5]

When it comes to the construction and maintenance of Swedish whiteness, complicity exists on all sides, even that of migrants who believe in the image of Sweden as the most egalitarian and antiracist country in the world. Then there are the numerous non-Swedes who desire and seek (white) Swedes as partners and friends, purely because they are (white) Swedes and therefore the most beautiful and genetically valuable people on earth – according to the Nordic racial myth.

Third World solidarity and antiracism has, in other words, gone hand in hand with white superiority and white homogeneity. It is this dual image of Sweden as an homogenous and white society that the Sweden Democrats mourn the loss of, and their response is to produce hatred towards migrants of colour. Meanwhile, it is the passing of the image of Sweden as an egalitarian and progressive society so dear to white antiracists that has provoked such a strong reaction among the Swedish elites after the election.

Central to this analysis is an understanding of whiteness as a category that constantly expands. [6] The boundaries of whiteness have always been reconstructed to include new members: for example Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans in the US. In the recent Swedish election, the expansion of the boundaries of whiteness blurred class differences, enabling the inclusion of white people from a range of class and cultural backgrounds to congregate around the notion of Swedish whiteness regardless of national origin. David Roediger has called this process “the wages of whiteness”, referring to “compensation” of white US workers for their economic subordination with the public and psychological wage of being considered white and therefore “American”. [7]
This means that race and racism are not merely the effect of class inequality, something that would necessarily disappear in a classless society. The expansion of the boundaries of whiteness helps explain the class-crossing practices found among the Sweden Democrats’ voters, as well as among far-right voters in the other Scandinavian countries. Many Sweden Democrats are migrants or descendants of migrants from white, western, Christian countries, or of non-white mixed and adopted Swedes, who also may identify with being Swedish in order to be able to gain “the wages of whiteness”.

**Gender equality and whiteness**

A central aspect of the construction of “good Sweden” has to do with the generous welfare state and achievements in gender equality. Along with other Scandinavian countries, Sweden has been regarded as exceptionally “woman-friendly” and ranked among the most gender-equal societies in the world. This ideal has been exported to other (Third World) countries through international development aid. However, the institutionalised gender equality discourse carries with it a sense of national identity that is intimately intertwined with whiteness and racial hierarchies, and that excludes migrants as Others. [8]

In order to maintain the supposedly uniquely Swedish construct of gender equality, non-whites are depicted as the “gender non-equal”, in conjunction with a discourse of the “oppression of the Other”. For Swedish white gender equality to exist, some-body is needed that is not Swedish, gender-equal and white. [9] This might explain why two of Scandinavia’s far-rightwing leaders are women, and why the Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik was obsessed by gender and sexual issues.

Gender equality, in its ideal form, is represented by the white heterosexual family. In Patricia Hill Collins’ analysis, the white family model is a site where notions of first- and second-class citizenship, territory, “home”, blood-ties, race, and nation are naturalized. [10] The white heterosexual family ideal is upheld by segregation, discrimination, racialized nationalism and anti-immigration policies. This implies that feminists should remain sceptical towards the Swedish ideal associated with the construction of the gender equal family, since it builds upon and reproduces the social, discursive and geographical relegation of the “Others”, often acted out as racialized integration through subordinating practices.

**White mourning and melancholia**

The normalized and naturalized hierarchies surrounding Swedishness and the double-binding power of Swedish whiteness through the mourning of the loss of “old Sweden” and “good Sweden” may explain the hysterical post-election anger among “progressives” about the “reactionaries’” electoral success. During the election campaign, the Sweden Democrats rallied under the slogan *Ge oss Sverige tillbaka* (“Give us Sweden back”), a slogan that appealed to both sides. It may also explain why the antiracist movement in Sweden and Scandinavia is so heavily dominated by white Swedes, in contrast to North America and the UK, where the antiracist movement is to a large degree composed of representatives of the minorities themselves. It may also explain why white Swedish feminists who identify with what has been called hegemonic feminism sometimes ally themselves with racist ideologies. [11]
The Sweden Democrats’ longing for “old Sweden” is expressed as a wish to return to a time when there were no ethno-racial conflicts and no non-western “patriarchal excesses”. For white antiracists, on the other hand, what is under threat is the image of Sweden as an antiracist and feminist country. Ultimately, these self-images are felt to be threatened by the presence of non-western migrants.

The fact of having held the title of the world’s most progressive and left-liberal country, combined with Sweden’s perception of itself as the most racially homogenous and pure of all white nations, forms a double bind that makes it almost impossible to transform Swedishness into something that will also accept people of colour. When the object of love – i.e. antiracist Sweden and ethnically homogenous Sweden – is besieged or threatened with distinction, there is nothing left but an unspeakable melancholia filled with limitless pain.

The notion of “lost Sweden” also excludes people who did not live in the country during the period being mourned, or people without biological ties to the “founders” of the ethos of solidarity. Thus, directly and indirectly, the image of left-liberal, antiracist and egalitarian Sweden is constructed around the image of a past in which diversity did not exist.

In other words, the recent election took place at a time when Sweden is wracked by white mourning and melancholia. Nostalgia for a white past constructed around the welfare state and the longing for a homogenous future in which hybridity has been erased is the common feature of white melancholia, which has also made itself heard in the debate following the Utøya massacre in Norway.

White melancholia, so painful to bear yet unspeakable, is a psychic state, a structure of connection to the nation, common to Swedes as well as to the image of Sweden in the world. It is as much about the humiliating decline of Sweden as frontrunner of egalitarianism, humanitarianism and antiracism as about the mourning of the passing of the Swedish population as the whitest of all white peoples.

Any future attempt to disentangle Swedishness and whiteness will have to be able to deconstruct a Swedishness that bars non-whites and traps white Swedes through the double-edged images of “old Sweden” and “good Sweden”. The hope is that a transformative moment will come about that allows the mourning for “old Sweden” and “good Sweden” to project itself towards a more constructive understanding of Swedishness.

However in order to be able to accomplish this transformation, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that the object of love is irretrievably and irrevocably lost, how painful that may be.

Footnotes

1. Tobias Hübinette and Carina Tigervall, "To Be Non-White in a Colour-Blind Society: Conversations with Adoptees and Adoptive Parents in Sweden on Everyday Racism", *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 30 (2009); Catrin Lundström, "Concrete Bodies: Young Latina Women Transgressing the Boundaries of Race and Class in White Inner-City Stockholm", *Gender, Place and Culture* 17 (2010); Lena Sawyer, "Routings: Race, African


**Published 18 October 2011**

Original in **Swedish**
First published in *Glänta 2/2011 (Swedish version); Eurozine (English version)*