

Is the Swede Human? Radical Individualism in the Land of Social Solidarity

A Lecture by Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh

Is the Swede Human? This is the provocative title of a new book by the two Swedish historians Henrik Berggren och Lars Trägårdh (*Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige*. Norstedts 2006). The book claims that the supposedly “socialist” Swedes are, in fact, individualists in extremis. To an extent unimaginable even in the US, they are devoted to the pursuit of personal autonomy. At the heart of the Swedish social compact lies a deeply rooted conception, what the authors call “a Swedish theory of love,” according to which authentic love and friendship is possible only between individuals who are independent and equal. This moral logic, joining the ideal of independence to those of economic equality and social solidarity, has been institutionalized in modern Sweden through a radical alliance between the individual and the state, which the authors term “statist individualism.” This has, on the one hand, liberated the individual from the ties of dependency that characterize the traditional family, churches, and charities, on the other, it has left the individual relatively powerless in relation to the state. This is a social contract, they argue, that differs dramatically from those of other modern, western democracies, notably the US and Germany, two countries that serve as comparative touchstones in the analysis.

Released in the fall of 2006, the book has received an animated reception in Sweden, with numerous reviews and editorial commentaries in print media, radio, and television. It has been called “the most important book of the season” (*Aftonbladet*), “brilliant” (*Expressen*), “a classic” (*UNT*) and a book that “must be read” if one is to “understand Sweden and the Swedes” (*Svenska Dagbladet*). It has also received attention in the international media, including a major news article in the *International Herald Tribune* (“Like Garbo, The Swedes Just Want to Be Alone”, Nov 13, 2006):

Unlike other classics in the “who are we” genre, like Luigi Barzini Jr.’s “The Italians,” the book by Trägårdh and Berggren is not a collection of anecdotes and historical events. Nor is it an academic analysis of how modern Sweden came into being. Instead, it is a mix of literary history, political science and the sociology of love. The philosophers Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau play prominent parts, as do Swedish authors and social engineers like Erik Gustaf Geijer and Alva Myrdal. Despite the eclecticism of its source material, the book is surprisingly accessible, and both reviewers and readers have taken it to heart. The book sold out in a matter of weeks and is being rushed back into print before Christmas. Although it is so far available only in Swedish, it has received attention abroad, in Germany’s *Die Zeit*, and France’s *Courrier International*.

A few links to reviews of *Är svensken människa*?

Herald Tribune: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/11/13/news/swedes.php>

Die Zeit: <http://www.zeit.de/2006/38/Schweden?page=2>

Svenska Dagbladet http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/rec_litteratur/did_13519184.asp

Dagens Nyheter <http://www.dn.se/DNet/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=577&a=568103>

Uppsala Nya Tidning http://www2.unt.se/avd/1,1786,MC=5-AV_ID=524347,00.html

About the authors:

Henrik Berggren is a prominent Swedish journalist and historian who has lived for extended periods of time in the US and Germany. He received his M.A. in history at UC Berkeley in 1986 and his Ph.D. at the University of Stockholm in 1995. Since then he has pursued a career in journalism, and today he is one of Sweden's leading public intellectuals. In 2000 he was appointed as the editor-in-chief of the influential Arts & Culture section of the leading daily newspaper of Stockholm, *Dagens Nyheter*, and since 2003 he writes for its editorial page. He has also continued to teach, lecture and publish academically. He has served as visiting professor at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany, and co-directed a research project at the Södertörn University College in Stockholm. He is currently at work on a new political biography on the assassinated Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme.

Publications by Henrik Berggren include:

“Jag hör Amerika sjunga” in Whitman, Walt, *Demokratiska perspektiv*. 2006.
“The forward-facing angel: nationalism and modernity in Sweden in the twentieth century” in Kurt Almqvist och Kay Glans, *The Swedish Success Story?* 2004.
Seklets ungdom. Politik, retorik och modernitet i Sverige 1900-1939. 1995.
Also see his paper: “Pippi Longstocking. The Autonomous Child and the Moral Logic of the Swedish Welfare State.” Presented at the *Children's Rights Conference* at Columbia University, May 24-26, 2006.

Lars Trägårdh is a historian and independent scholar who has lived in the US since 1970, while maintaining his personal and professional ties to Sweden. After living and carrying out research for several years in both Germany and Sweden, he received his Ph.D. in history from UC Berkeley in 1993. Subsequently he taught European history at Barnard College, Columbia University for ten years. He has also published frequently in Swedish newspapers and magazines, establishing a role as a public commentator on Swedish and American politics and society. Currently he divides his time between the US and Europe. He directs a major research project on social trust at Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm and also serves as a coordinator for long term EU funded program on social capital and social policy at London School of Economics.

Publications by Lars Trägårdh include:

State and Civil Society in Northern Europe: The Swedish Model Reconsidered (editor). 2007.
After National Democracy: Rights, Law and Power in America and the New Europe (editor). 2004.
Culture and Crisis: the Case of Germany and Sweden (editor with Nina Witoszek). 2002.
“Welfare State Nationalism: Sweden and the Specter of ‘Europe’” in Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (editors), *European Integration and National Identity: The Challenge of the Nordic States*. 2001.