In the spring of 1967, an exhibited print by the well-known leftist artist Carl Johan de Geer was confiscated by the police in Stockholm. It depicted a burning Swedish flag, capped by three slogans: “Dishonour the flag,” “Betray the Fatherland,” “Dare to be non-nationalist.” The flag itself had one word sprawled across it: Kuken, slang for penis. The motif was judged to be in breach of the Swedish constitution (by defiling the flag) and de Geer was fined in court. The episode sets the historic scene for this chapter. In the second half of the 1960s, self-proclaimed anti-patriotic sentiments like those voiced by de Geer were gaining widespread popularity among artists-cum-activists and within the growing movements of the New Left. Meanwhile, publicly funded “Sweden-information abroad” was expanding in scope and ambition. This chapter focuses on the relationship between these two developments, showing how practitioners in the field of Sweden-information navigated between the imperatives of efficient communication and democratic legitimacy. At the heart of this challenge lay the need to manage the diverging demands of the government’s foreign policy objectives, the export industry’s commercial interests, and a politically active cultural scene that was insisting that it should not have to cooperate with either.

Managing Diverging Demands

In many respects, representing Sweden abroad in the early 1960s was a thankful task: affluent, ambitiously reformist and technologically advanced, the country

2 In Sweden as in the rest of Europe (Garavini, After Empires, 91; 113–114).
3 Sverigeinformation i utlandet och kulturellt utbyte, literally “Sweden-information abroad and cultural exchange” was the label used to describe any activities – private or public – that were aimed at promoting Sweden abroad and at making the country known and appreciated among foreign publics. It included the work of government ministries, public agencies, semi-public organisations and private commercial and/or non-profit associations with international contacts. The term was loose and as such not bound to specific institutions but rather to a broad set of activities and (by implication, good) intentions.
had a positive reputation among political progressives in many Western countries.\(^4\) Prime Minister Tage Erlander was for instance informed by one of his advisors that his visit to the USA in 1961 had “finally convinced” Americans that “the welfare state had evolved from a crisis solution to a construction for the future.”\(^5\) However, by the end of the decade that construction was facing fierce criticism from within. Like many countries of Europe and North America, Sweden was going through rapid socioeconomic changes, and the political landscape was changing fast as a growing number of extra-parliamentary groups and public intellectuals gathered under the banner of the New Left. An important part of this mobilisation was taking place in the name of a politicised interpretation of ‘culture,’ distinct from the bourgeois aesthetic ideals of old and opposed to the modern forces of capitalism.\(^6\) The Social Democratic government, which had been primarily responsible for the swift and rapid expansion of the welfare state after the Second World War, found itself being outflanked by the new movements which were questioning the very welfare solutions and consensus-oriented politics that had come to define Sweden abroad.

Meanwhile, as these political groups and representatives of the arts were pressing the government with demands of socialisation, the radical redistribution of wealth and increased spending on cultural life and public goods, the prominent export-driven Swedish industry was eager to see an increase in state-funded export promotion.\(^7\) European integration was gaining pace and competition on the world markets was intensifying. Thus, while major private actors were asking for more active and effective promotion of Swedish capitalism, the New Left was criticising the government for not doing enough to practise solidarity and spread democratic socialism.

Despite a marked increase in government support during the decade, practitioners of the sprawling public-private field of Sweden-information found themselves with something of a legitimacy-deficit due to these widening ideological fissures in Swedish society. Quite simply: representing the nation was easier said than done as Sweden became increasingly politically polarised. As will be discussed below, employees of the semi-official Swedish Institute,

\(^5\) Swedish National Archives (RA), Marieberg, Upplysningsberedningen och Kollegiet för Sverige-information i utlandet (Ub/SiU), (Series) Flä (vol) 105, Öberg to Erlander, 22 September 1965.
\(^7\) Aktuellt om Sverige-information i utlandet (Hereafter: Aktuellt), 4 (1967), 2; Aktuellt, 7 (1968), 38.