American Mirrors and Swedish Self-Portraits: US Images of Sweden and Swedish Public Diplomacy in the USA in the 1970s and 80s

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Introduction: “But Do We Want to Change America into Sweden?”

In early spring 2013, the influential British newspaper *The Economist* joined the growing ranks of international observers claiming that the longstanding view of the Nordic countries as ‘socialist’ is mistaken and obsolete. The newspaper noted that the Nordic countries, including Sweden, have scaled down welfare expenditure, pushed through tax cuts, and promoted economic growth through increased labour market flexibility. The Nordic countries are thus on the way to transforming the supposedly Social Democratic Nordic welfare state model into a more liberal “super model” – in itself a good reason “why the world should look at the Nordic countries” despite their global insignificance and apparent smallness, according to this British newspaper.1

Nevertheless, the socialist stereotype of Sweden remains widespread in conservative political and ideological quarters, not the least in the USA.2 For example, when US President Barack Obama proposed partial government ownership of the auto industry, the banks and insurance companies as a way to save these branches of the economy from recession in February 2009, several US conservative political commentators sounded the alarm, warning that the Democrats were on the road towards turning the USA into a socialist state. In his program *The O’Reilly Factor*, Fox News Channel television host Bill O’Reilly asked rhetorically: “We’ve got to defeat this recession. But do we want to change America into Sweden?”3

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1 “The next supermodel,” *The Economist*, 2 February 2013. The degree of transformation can of course be debated and claims to this effect play a significant political function in the Nordic countries themselves, see for example Greve & Kvist, “Has the Nordic welfare model been transformed?”

2 While this socialist stereotype sometimes applies to ‘Europe’ as a whole for US conservatives, small states such as Sweden may be more prone to such stereotyping due to limited knowledge about these societies among the broader US public, providing a kind of small-state ‘blank canvas.’

At present, then, there are at least two competing images of Sweden prevalent in contemporary US debate. On the one hand, there is the conservative US understanding that Sweden – and to a lesser extent the Nordic countries more generally – represent some form of socialist system. By inference, any policy inspired by Swedish or Nordic precedents can thus be rhetorically branded as socialist in the USA, even if the policy in question would in Sweden itself rather be understood in terms of deregulation or neoliberalism. On the other hand, there is the progressive US view that Sweden – again together with the other Nordic countries – represents a ‘third way,’ combining comparatively high tax levels, relatively generous universal welfare provision, and progressive social values with high levels of competitiveness, innovation, market freedom, and socio-economic mobility. Likewise, this characterisation is made irrespective of the political profile of the respective Nordic governments. Possibly, this image is akin to European descriptions of the USA as ‘capitalist,’ regardless of whether the current administration happens to be Democratic or Republican.

In view of this observation, this chapter addresses the reciprocal relationship between American images of Sweden and Swedish attempts at shaping those images. Here, Swedish public diplomacy has been tasked with the complex challenge of achieving two distinct aims vis-à-vis a multifaceted ‘global opinion.’ On the one hand, it makes use of and relies upon already pre-existing views of Sweden as socialist and solidaristic in some regions, such as in the Third World. On the other hand, it aims at nuancing this image and eventually directing it away from the old image of the socialist Swedish model, to a new one of Sweden as an efficient, free, prosperous, and ultimately liberal society for parts of the world such as the USA.

This chapter tracks various views of Sweden as evidenced in US public debate, primarily through media reporting. Particularly valuable source material can be found in the reports compiled annually by the Press Bureau of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs from 1968 intermittently until 2002, tracking the press reporting on Sweden and things Swedish for official use at home. Combining these two sets of sources – US press reporting on the one hand and Swedish official ‘reports on reporting’ on the other – does not only provide insights into the development of views of Sweden abroad, it also allows us to trace how these images were relayed back to Sweden with a view of identifying the perils as well as the promises of providing ‘Sweden-information’ and ‘Sweden-publicity’ abroad as elements of official Swedish public diplomacy.

5 Egerstrom, Prosperity Ahead.
6 Marklund, “From the Swedish model to the open society.”