

SWEDISH MODERNISM

ARCHITECTURE CONSUMPTION AND THE WELFARE STATE

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black dog
publishing

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Edited by Helena Mattsson and Sven-Olov Wallenstein.

Designed by Johanna Bonnier at Black Dog Publishing.

BLACK DOG PUBLISHING LIMITED

104 AUSTIN STREET

LONDON W1C 2PG

UNITED KINGDOM

ISBN 978 1 85195 916 6

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A CIP record for this book is available from the British Library.

Black Dog Publishing Limited, London, UK,
is an environmentally responsible company.
SWEDISH MODERNISM is printed in UK on FSC
certified paper.

COVER IMAGE The exhibition *Without Borders*.
Photos: Soren Sundahl. Courtesy: Collection of
Arkitekturhuset, Stockholm.

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PIPPI LONGSTOCKING: THE AUTONOMOUS CHILD AND THE MORAL LOGIC OF THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE

HENRIK BERGGREN AND LARS TRÄGÅRDH

The rejection of Astrid Lindgren's first book about Pippi Longstocking in 1944 by the major Swedish publishing house Bonniers (which, incidentally, also owns Dagens Nyheter, the paper that one of the present authors, Henrik Berggren, work for) must surely count—alongside the recording company Decca's decision not to sign on four scruffy young men from Liverpool in the early 1960's—as one of the great commercial mistakes in the history of popular culture.

Though obviously not in the same class as Harry Potter, the books about Pippi Longstocking has been an enormous success the world over. Translated into more than fifty languages they have sold an estimated 50 million copies and been turned into films, theatre productions, and cartoons.¹ For a work of art to reach a global audience of this kind it must speak to the universal aspects of human existence. But all great literary figures are also deeply embedded in their culture of origin. This is no less true of children's books. Winnie the Pooh is quintessentially English, Tom Sawyer is unmistakably an American boy.

This goes for Pippi as well. She is a creation of Astrid Lindgren's literary imagination, but also a product of Swedish culture and history at a certain

point in time, namely the founding decades of the modern Swedish welfare state in the 1940s and the 1950s. That, at least, is the argument of this paper, which aims to highlight the specific cultural and moral logic that not only informs the books about Pippi, but also underpins the Swedish perception of children and children's rights through the twentieth century.

AN ÜBERMENSCH DISGUISED AS A CHILD

But let us first, for a brief moment, return to that unfortunate Swedish publisher who said no to Pippi Longstocking. In the absence of 20/20 hindsight, one could easily make the case that his decision was well considered.

After all, the Second World War was just ending and millions of people had been displaced. Families had been torn apart, and many children had lost one or both parents. To most people an ordinary and well-regulated family life certainly did not suggest narrow conventionality or suffocating boredom, but something to be intensely longed for. An evil ideology that posited that there are superior human beings of greater value than the rest of mankind and idolized strength and arrogant self-sufficiency, was just being defeated after five years of brutal war.

Imagine then, that a young unknown housewife submits a story about a nine-year old girl with superhuman powers whose mother is dead and whose father is vagrant laborer. The girl lives alone under unsanitary conditions, in a decaying house full of animals that at least occasionally reside in the kitchen and bedroom. She does not, however, lack for money. When need arises she just retrieves some gold coins from a chest left by her straying father, most certainly the gains of criminal acts of plundering and looting.

Our publisher doesn't have to be very politically correct to question whether this is the kind of story people will want to read in troubled times—even in Sweden, a country that sat out the war as a neutral. He doesn't—it seems to me—have to be a conservative supporter of family values to find the young girl's sassy back-talking to grown-ups and her unwillingness to follow any kind of social rules precocious, rude, and delinquent. He doesn't have to be Jewish—as he in fact was—to find something disturbing about the nietzschean aspects of a story where the main protagonist is, in the words of the author herself, “a superhuman being disguised as a child.”²

However, had he been gifted with great faculties of foresight, he could have realized that this was exactly the kind of story that not only many Swedish readers, but also parents and children of other nationalities in a war-stricken world, might take to heart. *Pippi Longstocking* was, in many ways, an up-beat book for coming times. With the help of the Marshall plan (a chest of gold coins, if there ever was one) Europeans would, with an amazing single-mindedness, go about rebuilding their world, not as it had been, but in the form of new, inclusive, and democratically responsive welfare states. There would be a spectacular boom in nativity, as if making children were a guarantee that the bad times would not return.³ And many would want only the best for their offspring, hoping they would be strong, independent, and compassionate enough not to fall prey to strong leaders, group think and frenzied nationalism. A bit like Pippi, in other words.

Furthermore (and for this we think he must be faulted because it concerns his proper métier, literary judgment), he could have seen that there was a tragic dimension in the aspiring author's manuscript that complicated its comic-book fantasy quality. The deviant Pippi is beyond a doubt an improper role model for any child. But that's not the way Astrid Lindgren set it up. The narrative unfolds not from Pippi's perspective,

but from that of Tommy and Annika, two sensible, sympathetic, and well-behaved children who live in an extremely cosy and conventional nuclear family in the *house next to Pippi's*.

The young reader—or listener—doesn't necessarily have to identify with Pippi, who is an unrealistic and unpredictable character, but can instead fantasize about being Tommy or Annika and having an amazing playmate like Pippi. That means enjoying adventures with her during the day, but having the option of going home to Mom and Dad in the evening and being safely tucked in bed. This is made quite clear by the author in a scene where Tommy and Annika watch Pippi's house at night from their bedroom window and realize how horribly lonely she must be. This is a passage that many may recall quite clearly from their own childhood, as the moment when you understood that, for all her superpowers, you do not wish to be like Pippi (who, anyway, was a girl, which made everything a bit more complicated).

So, paradoxically Pippi both offers an extreme version of child autonomy and a resounding confirmation of the social order that surrounds her. She is truly a totally sovereign individual who successfully defies all forms of authority: teachers, social workers, policemen, self-important businessmen.⁴ Her world displays most of the characteristics—non-productiveness, idleness, excessive and meaningless consumption, criminality and disorder—that according to the French philosopher Georges Bataille are the characteristics of the “sovereign man” who rejects the normal existence as a “servile man” subordinate to the social contract.⁵

Yet the small Swedish town she lives in, while well ordered, is not a particularly repressive or even suffocating place. The social conformity that Pippi revolts against does not appear to much bother other members of community. The policemen are a bit daft, but fundamentally kind, the social worker is a dull but well-meaning moralist, and the school-teacher is a strict disciplinarian but also gifted with great

psychological insight. They arouse no resentment in the reader, but rather an appreciation of the necessity of stability and social responsibility in a good society. They are the gentlest, the most non-coercive paternalists and guardians one can imagine.

THE SWEDISH THEORY OF LOVE

Pippi Longstocking is, of course, a piece of fiction and not a sociological treatise. Yet we would argue that there are few other cultures in the world that could have produced a similar children's book at the time. The originality of the Pippi stories are that they simultaneously take two radically conflicting ideas to their most extreme points of tension without compromise or easy resolution: on the one hand, total individual sovereignty, on the other the absolute necessity of a stable social order.

As a comparison it's worth remembering the peculiar American dilemma of Mark Twain, who was unable to finish *Huckleberry Finn* for a long time because he couldn't resolve the moral dilemma of the run-away slave Jim: should Huck respect property or human rights? Even fiction is bounded by what is thinkable in the world its creator inhabits.⁶ We don't mean that fictional writers cannot lie. This is, in fact, their trade. But we do think that their inventions generally have to be created in accordance with a moral logic that they themselves subscribe to and which in turn resonates with their readers, precisely because it is part of the cultural fabric.

In the case of *Pippi Longstocking* and Sweden, the basic axiom of this moral logic and from which all other normative propositions follow is that the most important value in life is self-sufficiency and independence in

respect to other members of the community. The person who must depend on his fellow citizens is subservient and unequal. This is bad enough in itself. But even worse, he who is in debt, who is beholden to others, or who requires the charity and kindness not only from strangers but also from his most intimate companions to get by, also becomes untrustworthy. His dependency on others forces him to socialize with and generally keep good relations with people that he might not like. He becomes dishonest and inauthentic.

What makes Pippi such a remarkable character is not that she's an unruly *enfant terrible*, or a charming troublemaker who pokes fun at the world of grown-ups—figures like these are a dime a dozen in children's books—but that she doesn't need anybody else, not even parental love and care.⁷ She is totally self-sufficient with her chest of gold and superhuman strength. Thus her friendship with Tommy and Annika is a marvellous gift to the two children, because they know that it is freely given, without any strings attached. This is tantalizing, but also frightening. To be a superhuman, is after all, something quite different from being an ordinary human being, willing to trade a little bit of this for a bit of that to get warmth, shelter, food, and companionship.

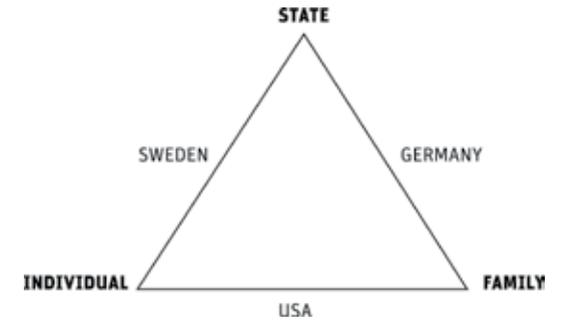
Lars Trägårdh has fittingly dubbed this normative ideal “the Swedish theory of love.”⁸ In most countries mutual dependency is seen as intrinsic to love and intimacy—the ties that bind. From this point of view, we are always and unavoidably enmeshed in social relations that circumscribe and limit our sovereignty. Indeed, it is the very giving up of radical sovereignty that makes us human; as a fundamental social virtue, love is all about unmediated and absolute duty towards one's fellow man. In Sweden—and perhaps Scandinavia at large—on the other hand, the premise is the reverse. Rejecting the idea of love as constitutive of unequal and hierarchical social relations, and basing instead the ethos of love on the principle of egalitarianism, the Swedish theory of love posits that all forms of dependency corrupt true love.

Only mutual autonomy can guarantee authenticity and honesty in human relationships.

It is true, of course, that simply as an *abstract idea* this is not original or peculiar to Sweden: the most eloquent expression of the notion of transparency in human affairs is Jean Jacques Rousseau. But, we argue, both through direct influences from Rousseau and, more importantly, in the form of anti-feudal peasant traditions that predate Rousseau by hundreds of years, this ideal of autonomy has, *in practice*, had a greater impact in Sweden than in most other parts of the western world.⁹

The Swedish pre-occupation—some might even say obsession—with individual autonomy cannot be understood simply as a cultural idiosyncrasy. It is, in fact, rooted in a historically grounded praxis that has to a high degree has been institutionalized in the institutions of the Swedish welfare state. What is unique about Swedish social policy is neither the extent to which the state has intervened in society nor the generous insurance schemes, but the underlying moral logic. Though the path in no way has been straight, one can discern over the course of the twentieth century an overarching ambition to liberate the individual citizen from all forms of subordination and dependency in civil society: the poor from charity, the workers from their employers, wives from their husbands, children from parents (and vice versa when the parents have become elderly). In practice, the primacy of individual autonomy has been institutionalized through a plethora of laws and policies affecting individual Swedes in matters minute and mundane as well as large and dramatic. As we shall see later, the ethos of individualism Swedish style has become manifest in many areas of legislation, including taxation policy, family law, rules regulating students loans, the production of day care centers, the family leave act, and, not least, the rights of children.

One way to illuminate the peculiarity of Sweden's social policies is to make explicit comparisons with other countries. Though most welfare regimes share a number



of characteristics, there is a marked difference in the basic set up of the Scandinavian models as compared with both their Anglo-American and continental European counterparts. In Germany and other continental European states, a strong family is both a means and an end for social welfare policies. The state protects and supports the family and other institutions in civil society, so that they in turn can provide for the welfare of the individuals.¹⁰ In the United States, there is a general antipathy toward state intervention, both when it comes to the family and the individual. The individual citizen should, ideally, either provide for him- or herself on the level playing field of the market, or trust in the goodwill of the family and the community.¹¹ Sweden is like Germany characterized by much greater acceptance of state intervention, but in this case the key alliance is between state and individual, rather than family and state. The aim, it appears, is to avoid subjecting individuals to the charity of others, and to make even relationships within the family as equal and voluntary as possible.

One can illustrate this difference by way of a triangle: in Germany the state and the family trump the individual; in the United States the individual and the family co-operate to keep the state out; and in Sweden the state and the individual ally themselves against the family. (See figure.)

“I KNOW WHAT IS MINE”: THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF SWEDISH INDIVIDUALISM

Many critics, both inside and outside Sweden, have seen in this alliance between state and individual an assault on the family, a case of odious, top-down social engineering. The usual suspects are well known: Alva and

Gunnar Myrdal and their fellow socialist intellectuals. The Swedish citizens, though democratically enfranchised, have either been hoodwinked or must be suffering from a massive case of Marxist false consciousness. To me this seems a rather unsatisfactory explanation. Much evidence points in another direction: that the Swedish Welfare state has institutionalized deeply embedded values and preferences. This, at least, would explain the way Swedes have voted during the duration of the twentieth century.

A closer examination of Astrid Lindgren's background backs up this assertion, if at an individual and anecdotal level. Her belief in the importance of individual autonomy can certainly not be attributed to intellectual flirtations with new-fangled, progressive ideas about permissive child rearing within the urban elite of the interwar years. On the contrary, her individualism was deeply rooted in the Lutheran yeoman culture that fostered her, and which also deeply influenced Swedish nineteenth and twentieth century national self-perception. She was born a couple of years before WWI on a family farm in Småland, a southern province of Sweden well known for its strong work ethic, religious piety, and active civil society. Self-improvement, education, and democratic participation were highly held values in her local milieu.¹²

Though obviously from a gifted family—her siblings would also have successful intellectual careers—her background was not unique in itself. In a comparative perspective, there is an overwhelming consensus among historians about two aspects of Swedish peasant culture. First, there is the weakness, not to say absence, of feudal institutions and a correspondingly strong history of peasant self-reliance and willingness to organize for political and social purposes. Secondly there is the traditionally greater individual autonomy within the agrarian household in Scandinavia in comparison with most other parts of Europe.

There is, of course, a strong mythological aspect to this oft-claimed lack of feudal traditions in Sweden. The

free Swedish yeomanry is in many ways an ideological construct as much the “free-born Englishman” or the “rugged individual” of the American frontier. But, on the other, hand, it is no less grounded in actual history either. The peasant in medieval Sweden, as the historian Michael Roberts has put it, “retained his social and political freedom to greater degree, played a greater part in the politics of the country, and was altogether a more considerable person, than in any other western European country.”¹³

This self-conscious, politically influential and culturally homogenous peasantry was both narrow-mindedly Lutheran and, quite understandably, strongly defensive of their property rights. But it was also deeply suspicious of all forms of aristocratic privilege. Without espousing any liberal ideas in terms of universal human rights or the importance of pluralism, Swedish peasants were socially and politically inclined to egalitarianism. The important thing was not that every human being was of equal worth, but that no individual person was above anybody else—except the king. For this reason, the peasantry proved quite willing throughout history to form alliances with the monarchy and the state to suppress all forms of aristocratic pretension.

When democratic and liberal ideas found their way to Sweden from the Continent in the nineteenth century they were effectively fused with these politically strong yeoman traditions. Aristocratic liberalism was not entirely absent, but there was no strong bourgeoisie that it could ally itself with. When the great liberal Swedish poet and historian, Erik Gustaf Geijer, rewrote Swedish history in the early 1800's, he instead made the Swedish peasant into the prime mover of history, a free man who fiercely protected his family and property but voluntarily would rally round the King if the nation was under attack. In poems as well as academic works he described the Swedish Viking and Yeoman as a citizen, who was characterized neither by bourgeois egoism nor by ancient republican virtue,

but by a stubborn individual sovereignty. Freedom, said Geijer, meant not be subordinated to any other man, to be without master like the Vikings of old. There were constraints: Geijer, a devout Christian, was not romancing about nietzschean Blond Beasts. Man was bound by the law, which “had been commonly agreed on, or inherited through the forefathers.” But that was a safeguard of freedom, a precondition not a limitation. No individual man could be subjected to another, no one could impose authority arbitrarily; everybody was subject to the law. “I give to God and King what is their due,” wrote Geijer in one of his most famous poems, but “that which is mine ... I freely enjoy.”¹⁴

Whatever one may think of the idea of a dialectical relationship between individual sovereignty and subservience to the impersonal power of the state, it is the basic concept that Swedish political culture has revolved around since the nineteenth century. The success of the Swedish Social Democrats can in no way be attributed to their faithful application of Marxist and socialist doctrines. Though undeniably skilful at making politics, it was also their luck to inherit a country with a strong egalitarian, peasant tradition that in many ways meshed well with their own political goals. Much of nineteenth century nationalistic and democratic rhetoric would be expropriated lock, stock, and barrel under the democratic-nationalist banner of the “people's home.” Superimposing traditional anti-aristocratic sentiments on the class struggle, the social democrats could posit the new cosmopolitan capitalist class as new Lords in the making, whom the patriotic People must unite against.

This does not mean that nineteenth century romantic nationalism translated easily into socialism in its usual sense. On the contrary, every time the Swedish labor movement has made any overt move to challenge property rights, they have been beaten back and lost the political initiative: this happened in 1928, when a parliamentary committee on socialization was in full swing; in the 1970's when the union movement launched

the idea of wage-earner's funds which would appropriate excessive profits; and, less obviously, after WWII, when central planning of the economy became a slogan.¹⁵

On the other hand, the Social Democrats have generally been able to garner widespread support for the state mandated redistribution of resources via social insurance and family legislation schemes, which in different ways have empowered and provided for the individual citizen. With respect to these reforms, there has been much less resistance to giving increasing powers to the state to intervene in the daily life of the citizenry, than was the case with reforms that sought to socialize private property.

Using the power of the state to promote individual autonomy in relation to the institutions of civil society comes with at a cost, however. The price for freedom from personal dependency is increased dependency on the state; the powers given to the state to emancipate the individual, makes that same individual powerless against the state—as Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw in his classic work, *Democracy in America*. Ironically, one of the causes of the Social Democrats loss of power in 1976 was an indignant article by Astrid Lindgren, in which she pointed out that due to the convoluted tax system, she was being forced to pay a tax rate of 102 percent.¹⁶ Less comically, the result of such trust in, and empowerment of, the state has also lead to serious violations of what we now think of as fundamental human rights, as well as unintended consequences that undermine the very idea of individual autonomy. The involuntary sterilization of thousands of Swedish women between the 1930's and 1970's point to the lack of the necessary checks on state power exercised in the name of the people.¹⁷ And though universal insurance systems do in fact empower citizens and give them autonomy in relationship to family, charity organizations, and employers, there obviously is a point of diminishing returns. If too many people become too dependent on the state, the traditional ideal of individual sovereignty turns into socialist subservience.¹⁸

But even though there are limits to how far the alliance between state and individual can be taken while still retaining individual civil liberties and minority rights, it is clear this project—the welfare state—has been a voluntary undertaking on the part of the Swedish people throughout the twentieth century. Many outside observers have been baffled by a country whose inhabitants are, on the one hand, extremely conformist, painstakingly law-abiding and, according to many foreign observers, a bit dull, and, on the other hand, put great emphasis on individual autonomy, have little respect for traditional authority, and show great social and geographic mobility. As Mauricio Rojas, a liberal member of the Swedish parliament of Chilean extraction, has put it: “This balance between public collectivism and private individualism, between groupthink and militantly guarding one’s own turf is extremely difficult to understand and deal with for an outsider.”¹⁹

Be that as it may, those of us who have been nurtured on *Pippi Longstocking* find the peaceful coexistence of individual freedom and a conformist social order not quite so paradoxical. From the perspective of what might be termed the Swedish ideology, active interventionism on the part of the state to promote egalitarian conditions is not a threat to individual autonomy but rather the obverse: a necessary prerequisite to free the citizens from demeaning and humbling dependence on one another.

As a culture and a political system Sweden cannot simply be described as communitarian, that is, as a society in which the citizens prize their voluntary association with one another above their empowerment as individuals. In fact, the official rhetoric about solidarity and social democracy notwithstanding, Sweden is not first and foremost a warm *Gemeinschaft* composed of altruists who are exceptionally caring or loving, but a rather hyper modern *Gesellschaft* of self-realizing individuals who believe that a strong state and stable social norms will keep their neighbor out of both their lives and their backyards.

It is, of course possible to call these ideals collectivistic, in the sense that any line of thought that relies heavily on state power can be termed thus. But it doesn’t really make much sense. A more proper term would be “statist individualism”, a concept that captures the seeming paradox of an ethos that is based on a strong alliance between the state and the individual aiming at making each citizen as independent of his or her fellow citizens as possible.²⁰ In Sweden this penchant for equality has been democratic, both in terms of popular support and the methods employed. Rule of law, property rights, and respect for market economy have not only been upheld, but are in fact a fundamental part of the national mind-set. In this perspective, Pippi Longstocking is not a novel character in Swedish letters, but in fact, something much more recognizable: a free yeoman, a Viking, roaming around in her backyard, exercising her fundamental rights as a citizen.

THE NORDIC FAMILY

There is, of course, one obvious difference between Pippi and the romantic heroes of nineteenth century Swedish nationalism: she is a child. The status of children and young people has always posed a complication in the democratic and liberal political tradition. It is one thing to proclaim that “all men are created equal,” quite another to give rights to those who are yet men-to-be. Given that human offspring take a long time to reach full physical maturity and thus are dependent on others for protection and nurturing, the question of children’s right becomes deeply problematic. Most people would certainly agree that children have rights of some kind, but the question is whether they have these rights as “children-as-such” or as future citizens? If there are inalienable children’s rights, then obviously children themselves must have

a voice in defining them. If, on the other hand, these rights are meant to ensure that they are in a position to become full citizens when they have reached man- or womanhood, they must be supervised by guardians who can judge their dependants future interests.

This is rather scholastic way of putting it, of course. Few advocates of the extreme ends of both positions can be found. But read in a certain way, *Pippi Longstocking* can be interpreted as a literary depiction of the child as a citizen with the full and equal rights of adults. This was how the many Swedish critics in the 1940’ and 1950’ s saw it. Her self-sufficiency, the lack of parental supervision, the endless supply of money and her superpowers created an unrealistic and alienated fantasy world in which children might come to believe that they did not need the advice and protection of grown-ups. One can fault the critics with making a philistine reading of a more ambiguous literary work than they could comprehend. But they had a point nevertheless.

Astrid Lindgren was provocative because she portrayed childhood as a value unto itself. Being a child was intrinsically interesting. Young people weren’t worthy of attention because of what they might become, but in terms of what they already were. Paradoxically, this was perhaps more disturbing to adult sensibilities because it placed greater responsibility on the shoulders of grown-ups. Taking care of somebody when you know what’s best for them can difficult and demand great sacrifices. But at least you get to decide. Protecting a child—because ultimately the adults are always responsible for children anyway—and at the same time respectfully treating it as an individual whose wishes and opinions matter is a more complex method of child-rearing. If carried to far, it might make the project of parenthood so daunting that only a small elite would be willing to undertake it.

So even in terms of Swedish culture Pippi Longstocking was on the far end of what was conceivable in terms of

individual sovereignty. Yet this should not blind us to the fact that she was only possible as a character because of certain historical features of the traditional Scandinavian peasant family.

Sweden—and Scandinavia—fall very clearly on the one side of the fault line that John Hajnal drew in the 1960’s, and which divides European family culture into very distinct traditions. On the one side—in Northern and Western Europe—late marriages, nuclear families and children sent away to work outside the home. On the other—in eastern and Mediterranean Europe—early marriages, extended households and children mainly reared within these households.²¹

According to Hajnal and his followers the system in the Northwest—termed “the European marriage pattern”—was more conducive to individual autonomy. Late marriages meant both fewer children, which in turn meant that each child represented a larger emotional investment from the parents, and fewer widows who had to be maintained through relatives or poor relief. It also entailed a prolonged period of youth, under which sexually mature individuals had to be socially controlled. This created a semiautonomous and self-regulating youth culture. Sending children away to work in other households also broadened their perspectives and encouraged the learning of new skills—as well as weakening traditional “honor culture” norms where women weren’t allowed to move freely without supervision. According to the Austrian historian Michael Mitterrauer this mobility made the period of youth a time in which “the individual, the autonomous personality, was developed.”²²

But even within the European marriage pattern Sweden stands out, according to several family historians. Young people were controlled by internalized systems of self-control, not least the tradition of “night bundling” which, though in no way unique to Sweden, was very widespread and prominent.²³ The greater autonomy within the family

didn't necessarily lessen generational conflict, however. According to the leading historian of Nordic family history, David Gaunt, the laws that regulated the duty of sons and daughters to care for their elderly or sickly parents were weaker—though not non-existent—in comparison with Continental Europe. The more voluntary character of family obligations created great tensions within the family, and, argues Gaunt, paved the way for a ready acceptance of state interventionism in the care of elderly and dependant parents.²⁴

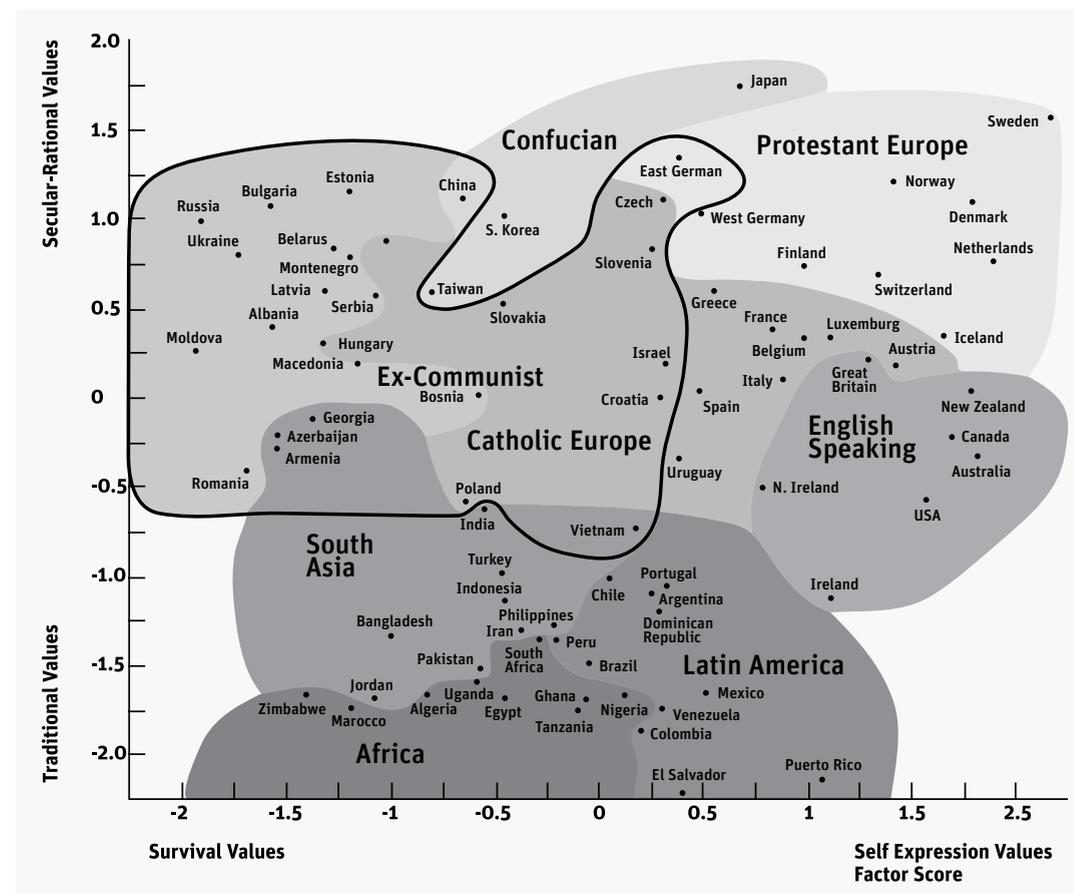
One can also note that the Nordic countries stand out in terms of the weaker sanctity of the marriage contract. The church did not gain a monopoly on marriage until the 18th century, and even so, cohabitation without marriage was very common in Stockholm in the 19th century. Divorce was easier in Scandinavia than in the rest of both Catholic and protestant Europe. Since the 16th century even peasants could turn to ecclesial courts to get a complete separation with the possibility of remarriage.²⁵

To make the case that the traditional Lutheran household in agrarian Sweden was a harbinger of gender equality and progressive ideas about child rearing would obviously be wrong-headed. In the early 19th century it, in fact, appeared primitively patriarchal compared to the advances regarding women's right of property and political rights that were being made in more advanced Western European countries such as France and England.²⁶ But despite—or perhaps just because of—the relatively weak position of bourgeois family values Sweden and Scandinavia could take the lead in the 20th century in loosening family bonds and legislating new family laws that more and more came to emancipate the individual from his or hers traditional dependency within the family.²⁷ Today's more liberal divorce laws, judicial equality between spouses, and legalization of homosexuality were put in place in the 1960's in most European countries, but in Scandinavia these reforms were carried through during the interwar years.²⁸

Whatever her critics have said, Astrid Lindgren probably had no intention whatsoever to attack the family as an institution in *Pippi Longstocking*. She was a firm believer in the traditional family, as evidenced by many of her other books, filled with wise, warm, loving family relationships. But her "traditional family", of course, was not the Anglo-American bourgeois family with its patriarchal cult of domesticity, but rather a traditional agrarian Scandinavian household where both parents contributed, had their separate areas of authority and the children roamed freely without much supervision.

THE UNBLOODY REVOLUTION²⁹

This family model was, however, rapidly fading into history. It may not have seemed so in the 1940's, though. Sweden was still, despite its rapid and successful modernization and industrialization, in many ways an agrarian country. Many of today's sadly depopulated rural areas in Sweden reached their all time-high in terms of inhabitants in the early 1950's, just before the great and still unsung great exodus of Swedes into cities and urban areas. The Swedish countryside abounded with small schools, co-operative stores, free churches, and working-class educational institutes. Like in the rest of the Western world, the marriage rate was higher than at any time before in history.³⁰ The family with a working father and a stay-at-home mother, who retained something of the status of her role in the traditional yeoman household, seemed completely hegemonic. And perhaps to larger extent than historians have realized hitherto, Swedish housewives of the 1940' and 1950's contributed to family income through different forms of more informal work arrangements.³¹



In this world both the unbounded freedom and the strict social order of *Pippi Longstocking* was possible. Seen from today's perspective, the question becomes more problematic. The 1960's and 1970's would see a radical transformation of Swedish society. Not in the direction of some kind of socialism as was advocated in the revolts of 1968, but toward a extensive legislative program that all but did away with the family as a mediating institution between the state and the individual.³² Taxation and student loans became individualized, which in effect meant that all kinds of interfamily dependence that was sanctioned by the state were done away with. Day-care became next to universal, making it possible for women to work. Maternity leave was turned into parental insurance, nominally gender blind, though in practice mostly utilized by mothers. Corporal punishment of children was outlawed, something that still causes raised eyebrows in the rest of the world. Children's rights were strengthened through the creation of a special ombudsman. All in all, these reforms have made Sweden—and to a somewhat lesser extent the rest of Scandinavia—into the least family-oriented and most

individualized societies on the face of the earth.

The extreme peculiarity of Sweden has become clearer in recent years as a wealth of comparative data on a global scale has become available. These indicate that it is Sweden, not the United States, which occupies the leading edge of modernization in terms of individualization. Whereas the United States by comparison stands out as rather traditional when it comes to submission to traditional values that give priority to God, patriarchal family values, and patriotism, Sweden scores at the extreme end of both emancipatory self-expression values and secular-rational values. According to a recent World Values Survey mapping of how different countries place themselves according to these value dimensions, Sweden finds itself alone in the upper-right corner of the map, while the US takes a more middling position tending towards traditional rather than secular-rational values.³³(See figure)

When asked questions about religious beliefs, attitudes toward authority within the family, tolerance for different forms of sexual preferences, and importance of traditional gender roles Swedes (along

with the Dutch) tend to express the most liberal values throughout Europe and the world. The only countries in Europe where less than half of the population agree with the statement “regardless of what the qualities and faults of one’s parents, one must always love and respect them” are Sweden and the Netherlands. The conclusion of the of scholars analyzing the World Values Survey data is that “the US is not the prototype of cultural modernization; the Scandinavian peoples are on the cutting edge of cultural change.”³⁴

From a critical viewpoint, it could be feared that these findings show that the Swedish welfare state has turned its children into a nation of not-so happy Pippi Longstockings. Though not literally orphaned, they have been abandoned by working mothers. The divorce rate is high in a comparative perspective; only about 73 percent of all children live with both their biological parents. Alarming rates of stress and psychological ill-health are reported in newspapers. The gentle paternalists that surrounded Pippi Longstocking have disappeared, replaced instead by a lack of social control and cohesiveness that make the children easy targets for a commercial culture that exploits their inchoate desires as they hesitantly step into the adult world. And when confronted with sexual predators on the Internet or the lure of alcohol and drugs, they have neither the strength nor the wisdom of Pippi Longstocking.

On the other hand, the crisis of the family is not a local Scandinavian phenomenon. Basically one can see two trends. One is the upholding of traditional family values through low divorce rates and low female participation in the work force, of which the most obvious example is Italy. This traditionalism comes, however at the price of extremely low birth rates and possibly a social inflexibility that is damaging to economic development, whatever upside there is in terms of quality of life.³⁵ On the other hand there is the United States, a society that puts great emphasis on individual self-realization, and where women both

work and have children to a greater extent than in most other Western countries. Given the great hostility to state interference in the family, however, this has a negative effect for American children, not least in terms of traditional family values. The divorce rate is high, the number of single-parent households large, and the percentage of children who live with both their parents lower than in any other economically advanced country. The high number of teenage pregnancies also indicates that social control through religion and family values is not working.³⁶

Sweden, it must be emphasized is not, the middle way between Italy and the United States. Basically Sweden is a variation of the American situation. It is a modernistic, highly individualized society that differs in one important respect: the absence of an anti-state ideology. Sweden and the US share the dubious distinction of topping international statistics in terms of divorce and children not living with both their biological parents. Both, it can be argued, suffer from the breakdown of traditional social support structures through the acceptance of globalization and a competitive market economy. Drugs, sexual promiscuity and strong youth sub-cultures are part of everyday life. Both countries can supply good arguments for general critique of modern, western civilization.

Yet, as the American sociologist David Popenoe, who has highlighted many of the negative aspects of the lack of family values in Scandinavia, has concluded recently: “Sweden comes up short in those aspects of good family culture that entail enduring relationships between parents, but does much better in terms of allowing parents—single or double—to actually spend time with their children. It is in general a more child-friendly society, with less child poverty and a larger willingness to make room for the needs of children in society.”³⁷ The downside of this is, however, that those families where the woman wants to stay at home and not send the children to day-care are put in the

situation of being forced to pay taxes for a system that does not recognize their notion of what is good for their children. Regardless of whether the state or the market sets the rules, it seems that some children and parents always will be short-changed, one way or the other.

Paradoxically, given our intuitive understanding of the US as an individualistic nation and Sweden as a softly socialistic one, Sweden is far more consistent in its embrace of the idea of individual autonomy. In the US the liberal individualism of the market society co-exists most uneasily with its opposite, a conservative communitarian ethos centered on family, religion and nation. This is simultaneously a source of strength and vitality—an expression of the cultural and social heterogeneity that both baffles and impresses outside observers—and a cause for confusion, contradiction and deep division—between “red” and “blue”—America.

The differences between Swedish and American notions of individual autonomy are displayed in the diverging attitudes toward the conflict between parental and children’s rights in the two cultures. Or perhaps more correctly, in the recognition of such a conflict. In the United States, it seems to me, it is often taken as a matter of fact that free choice and individual empowerment entails a far-reaching right of parents to socialize and educate their children according to their own cultural norms. Given the great historical tradition of American diversity and pluralism, this is of course not surprising in any way. Sending children to religious schools, or even instructing them at home is basically uncontroversial. It is part of the American ethos of communitarian freedom from state interference.

In Sweden, religious free schools have, on the other hand, been introduced quite recently and constitute a break with a strong tradition of normative state-Lutheran secularism. The lingering resistance against religious schools has, however, mainly been based on the argument that children have specific rights that are separate from their families and that these must

be protected by the state. Freedom of worship, it is claimed, does not give parents the right to impose their beliefs on their children. Though it seem unlikely that Sweden will backtrack from the free-school reform of the 1990’s—given the greatly increased multi-cultural composition of the country this would imply quite draconian policies which could alienate many immigrants—it also seems probable that religious schools will be heavily scrutinized by school inspectors to ensure that children are given at least a nominal right to choose what to believe and what not to believe in.³⁸

Another indicative example is the question of gay rights. Some observers have noted a curious contrast between the US and Sweden in this regard. While one might expect the US to take a rather dim view of both gay marriages and gay adoptions and, conversely, Sweden to stand out as progressive in both regards, it turns out not to be quite so simple. While it is obviously true that gay marriage remains a highly controversial issue in the US, what is often over-looked is that adoption of children by gays is not prohibited but indeed rather common. In Sweden the opposite is true: gay marriage or partnership is today relatively uncontroversial (although an opposition of course exists there as well), whereas the adoption of children by single or couples gays remains a problematic issue.

One way of understanding this difference is to see that while in the US marriage is a highly public matter, and the family a sacred institution, children are by and large seen as a kind of private property, or something to which every adult individual has a right. In Sweden, on the other hand, the family is the private matter, while it is the child who is the public matter. Indeed, it is precisely the relationship between State and Child that has historically been the linchpin of the welfare state social contract. Thus, while the privatizing of marriage and family relations is of relatively little consequence, the subjecting of children to the whims of individual choice, life-style, religious faith, or sexual

identity, is quite a different matter. That is, in Sweden and the US the trump cards are different: in the one case children's rights protected by the state, in the other, the rights of families and communities vis-à-vis the state.

Pippi Longstocking is a fanciful fantasy about the sovereign child. Yet the idea that children are individuals in themselves and not just the property of their parents has also informed the Swedish Welfare state to a great degree. The cynical--or perhaps just suspicious--observer could argue that this notion is merely used to justify extensive and harmful state interventions in the family, and to undermine the rights of the adult individual. After all, who can oppose a state power that is motivated by the highest moral objective that can be imagined: protecting the most innocent, exposed, and trusting citizens in our society.

To reduce the idea of the intrinsic value of childhood simply to an authoritarian ruse would, however, be to display a rather naïve understanding of not just Sweden and Swedish culture, but also of human nature and the transforming power of capitalist development. The temptation on the part of the adult world to view children as a means to an end is great. In a world of commodification, children are the ultimate consumer good. They can give great gratification: love us, realize our failed ambitions and give meaning to our lives. But they can also hurt us, revolt against us and not least, greatly infringe on our own individual autonomy. We can destroy them either by giving them too much or too little freedom. If we are to find that balance we must force ourselves to remember that children are not our property, not extensions of ourselves but individuals in their own right.

- 1 Strömstedt 1977.
- 2 Strömstedt 1977. The reference was not odd in the tradition of Swedish letters. Nietzsche had a great impact on intellectual life in Sweden at the closing of the 19th century. See Borland 1955 and Brandl 1977.
- 3 Judt 2005.
- 4 Lundqvist 1979.
- 5 Bataille 1991, Berggren and Trägårdh 2006.
- 6 Marx 1964.
- 7 The French editors of Pippi found her superpowers disconcerting and did their best to tone down her self-sufficiency and autonomy in relation to the adult world. See Blume 2001.
- 8 Trägårdh 1997, Berggren and Trägårdh 2006
- 9 Berman 1970, Starobinski 2002.
- 10 German Chancellor Angela Merkel newly appointed minister for family affair, Ursula von der Leyen has stirred up controversy by declaring that it must be possible for German women both to work and have children. Dr von der Leyen, a physician and mother of seven, is by many considered to be a "Rabemutter", that is a woman who leaves the nest to pursue a career. Landler 2006.
- 11 For a provocative historical view on American individualism, see Shain 1994.
- 12 Strömstedt 1977.
- 13 Roberts 1967. See also Aronson 1992 and Österberg 1993.
- 14 Berggren and Trägårdh 2006. For discussions of Geijer's philosophy see Hessler 1937/1947 and Ehnmark 1999.
- 15 Nilsson 2004.
- 16 Lindgren 1976.
- 17 Broberg and Tydén 1996.
- 18 About one million people are today considered to be dependant on different form of social insurance because of unemployment or unhealth.. DN XXXX.
- 19 Rojas 2001.
- 20 Trägårdh 1997, Berggren and Trägårdh 2006
- 21 Hajnal 1964, Mackie 2001, Therborn 2004.
- 22 Mitterrauer 1988.
- 23 Shorter 1975, Gaunt 1996.

- 24 Gaunt 1996.
- 25 Gaunt 1996, Taussi Sjöberg 1996,
- 26 Qvist 1978.
- 27 Norman 1983.
- 28 Ronfani 2001, Bradley 2000.
- 29 From the title of a book on the rapid changes in family policy in the 1960s and 70s in Sweden, originally from a 1968 quote from a Anna-Greta Leijon, a future minister in the Swedish government but then a bureaucrat working on a text that would project a new image of a gender equal Sweden (Florin & Nilsson 2000).
- 30 Therborn 2004.
- 31 Ohlander & Strömberg 1996.
- 32 Florin & Nilsson 2000.
- 33 Inglehart and Welzel 2005, Halman, Luijckx, and van Zandert 2005, Petterson and Esmer 2006.
- 34 Halman, Luijckx, and van Zandert 2005
- 35 Kye 2005, The Economist 2005.
- 36 Popenoe 2005, Björnberg & Bradshaw 2006.
- 37 Popenoe 2005. See also Popenoe 1988, 1991.
- 38 Fjellkner 2006.