Striking a Balance between Diversity and Social Cohesion: Examples from Sweden

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Abstract: I will address the issue of the policies Sweden has adopted to integrate its migrant population, and on the other hand its stand in relation to the indigenous Saami population. While Sweden has developed liberal policies of multiculturalism to incorporate its migrants (social, educational and economic equality, support for cultural maintenance etc., voting rights in local and county elections for permanently residing non-Swedish nationals, liberal naturalisation conditions), it has traditionally been unwilling to recognise or accept Saami claims to special treatment in questions where land rights are concerned. A multicultural policy that does not consider the position of traditional ethnic and ethno-territorial minorities will not appear to have credibility. These two different policy approaches cannot be understood without a closer look at the formation of the Swedish nation state. Issues that I want to address are about bringing together two different discourses. What happens when multiculturalism is imported into the older structure of the nation state? A lot has been written about multiculturalism and probably even more on the nation state. However, much of the work on multiculturalism is inspired by experiences in countries based on immigration (Australia, Canada, the United States). These experiences do not necessarily apply in the older European nation state context. On the other hand, most work on nation state formation departs from European experiences, but rarely addresses the issues of incorporating people of immigrant origin. Multiculturalism, or diversity, is not immediately compatible with traditional conceptions of the nation state. Values that relate to national identity, common history and common destiny, majority language and national/ethnic stereotypes are used, or may be used to create a sense of national/ethnic unity by excluding the ‘Other’. How is social cohesion achieved in a society moving towards diversity? How should the national story be rethought to include migrants as well as indigenous minorities? Can Human Rights serve as a value base in an ethnically diverse Swedish society? I will finally address some questions relating to citizenship and identity.
The Swedish Model

Over a period of thirty years Sweden has developed a set of policies aimed to incorporate international migrants into Swedish society. Sweden has a number of instruments at its disposal that on the whole have proved to be operational. Nevertheless, when we step back and look at the immigration/integration policy context as a whole, it is quite apparent that current policies are in a state of muddle and even contradiction. In this paper I will outline the general context for policies. There is a need to sort out some of the confusion.

Ever since a commission in the late 1960s was appointed to draw up policies for the field of immigration, the authorities have been concerned about potential conflict. For many years now continued large-scale immigration has been regarded as fuel for social (or ethnic) conflict. Militant racist and neo-Nazi groups that for instance speak in terms of “the coming race war” confirm these fears. More importantly, even large sectors of the population that would never dream of siding with Nazi thugs are highly critical of immigration, thus putting the authorities on the defensive. The implicit but principal aim of policies in this field, it seems, has become to avoid conflict. Thus, since the early 1970s immigration policy is aimed to reduce immigration to a minimum.

The integration policy on the other hand is aimed to incorporate migrants into mainstream society. Making migrants less visible is then a complementary strategy to steer clear of manifest conflict. There is a problem though: Officially assimilation was abandoned as a policy goal in the mid-1970s and a form of multiculturalism through integration was officially accepted. Different words appearing in this discourse over the years—integration, pluralism, multiculturalism and diversity—all seem to stand for accepting (certain) differences but “doing things in the Swedish way”. Unofficially assimilation is still seen as the best solution. Integration “the Swedish way” basically boils down to a form of subtle assimilation. What the authorities ultimately aim at is control of societal development. Reforms that are introduced, no matter in what social domain, imply and rely on some form of bureaucratic societal control mechanisms. Social engineering has served as the means to achieve ends.

Today the codeword is diversity. Key issues are: How much diversity can be accepted without overt expressions of social conflict? How much diversity can be accepted without loss of control over social developments? Public acceptance for diversity needs to be achieved, but social engineering is not well adapted to achieve this aim. One might put it that the concession that the authorities are willing to make to an ethnocentric public opinion in order to achieve an acceptance for diversity is to keep future immigration at a minimum. Diversity, however, is linked with immigration. If immigration is stopped, true diversity will come to an end. We need to realize that the aims are contradictory.

A concrete proposal addressed to Swedish policy makers is to reassess immigration policy. The official view of not accepting labour migrants from non-EU/EEA countries, and only accepting refugees who unquestionably meet the criteria of the Geneva Convention is hypocrisy. Everyone knows that
international migrants find their way to Western countries, Sweden being no exception. It is all part of globalisation and transnational networks. Instead of being on the defensive, and thus appeasing the ethnocentric opinion, the authorities need to be on the offensive. Opening up for what can be agreed on as a reasonable immigration program is support for diversity. Diversity, then, is not a means to handle what is perceived as “problematic immigration”. Rather, immigration needs to be seen as a positive means to achieve the goal of diversity. Opening up for a liberal refugee policy is in effect to support human rights values. All Western countries have aging populations. If welfare systems are to be maintained immigration of manpower will soon become an economic demographic necessity. Since all EU member states are facing the same problem, the freedom of movement within Schengen is not the long-term solution to the coming need for manpower.

The Saami

There is another factor in this equation that is usually addressed in a totally different context, namely the position of traditional ethnic and ethno-territorial minorities. The central problem for the Saami in Sweden is a lack of recognition in practice of their traditional right to use land for reindeer herding. In theory there is recognition. Yes, there is a reindeer herding act, and an amendment from 1989 to this act, which guarantees the Saami the right to use land for grazing of their herds, and moving herds from summer pastures to winter pastures. But interests of farmers, hunters, the forest industry, the mining industry, and hydroelectric schemes conflict with the interests of the Saami. Farmers and the forest industry are entitled to full compensation for damage caused to their plantations and seedlings by the reindeer. However, there is a certain amount of bureaucracy involved and to land owners things would be a lot simpler without reindeer herding at all. Inevitably there is tension. Basically the Saami are not interested in land ownership as such but of land use according to rights sanctioned by traditional usage. The legal problem is the lack of historical documents testifying to this right.

The so-called Taxed mountains case 1966-1981 attracted a lot of attention, and rightly so. In this case the Saami claimed ownership to land in the province of Jämtland. The evidence attesting to this claim were documents proving that the Saami had paid tax to the Swedish Crown in the 17th century for this land. The district court in Jämtland ruled in favour of the Saami case. However the case was contested through all instances. The High Court of Appeal ruled that the evidence was insufficient to establish historical ownership of land, offering the interpretation that it was rather a kind of lease-hold arrangement. What is surprising is that precisely this type of evidence (having paid taxes on land) has been used to establish land ownership in other cases.

In 1992 the Saami were dispossessed of their exclusive right to hunt small-game in the mountain region and the land above the cultivation zone. The powerful hunter’s lobby, enrolling 300,000 members as compared to the Saami minority of 17,000, and headed by the former party secretary of the Social Democrats, Bo Toresson, played an important role here. To the Saami this was yet another example of the Swedish nation state encroaching upon traditional rights to land and game. This was a case of
greater symbolic than economic importance to the Saami, although the latter obviously cannot be
dismissed. As recently as February 2002 the court of appeal in Sundsvall ruled in favour of Swedish
farmers in their conflict with Saami herders about land usage in Härjedalen, a southern region of the
county of Jämtland.

In 1986 an Ombudsman against racial and ethnic discrimination was established. The former
ombudsman Frank Orton found that the greater part of the cases brought to his attention were raised by
Saami complainants. Figures again: 17,000 Saami; 900,000 foreign-born migrants.

Sweden has not signed the ILO 169, the International Convention on Indigeneous and Tribal Peoples of
1989 (US, Canada, Denmark, Norway and New Zealand have, and soon Finland). However, some
positive developments should be mentioned. First language recognition; in 2000 Saami was recognised
as an official language, and secondly, the Saami have a reasonably high level of material standard.

**Developing a multi-ethnic society**

While a multicultural discourse is obvious in the policies of incorporation of migrants, a nation-state
discourse is brought to the fore even in the quite recent history of Saami relations with the Swedish
state.

As far as developing a multiethnic society is concerned, there are two lines of general policy that need
to be pursued and maintained. The first one relates to a reassessment of what Swedish society is, and
how it regards itself. If one really wants to tackle the root problems of discrimination and social
exclusion, to combat obstacles in terms of mind-sets, attitudes, discriminatory practices, rules and
regulations that give preferential treatment to ethnic Swedes, one has to look at the foundations of the
nation state itself. This means to critically reassess the national story of who belongs and who is
accepted. If migrant minorities are to be incorporated while maintaining identity, language etc., the
existence and rights of traditional minorities also need to be recognised. Cultural and ethnic diversity
can be an enormous asset to society, but it can also become a cause of social tension and conflict. This
highlights the issue of *social cohesion* in a multicultural society, a question that has not been adequately
addressed by policy makers in Sweden. Religion, language and culture were traditionally factors
working for social cohesion. In modern liberal democracies the myth of the nation state has served a
similar purpose. However, there is no simple answer to the question of what social cohesion can be
built around in a multicultural society. An essential element must be acceptance of universal values and
principles. Human rights is a starting point.

The second line of policy is one of empowerment of those groups in society that are victims of social
exclusion, discrimination and lack of opportunities. To a certain extent it is along these lines that
Swedish integration and incorporation policies have operated. This goes back to the experiences of
transforming a class-ridden impoverished rural society into a modern welfare state. Public education,
adult education, social welfare benefits, public health services, political participation, interest organizations and active labour market interventions were policies that developed during the course of building the welfare state. Basically these same instruments have been employed for the purpose of integrating international migrants and their children.

Both these approaches are implemented, but not with the full commitment that is required. Anti-discriminatory legislation, when it at long last was enforced, proved to be rather toothless. Language courses both in terms of mother tongue instruction for school children and Swedish language courses for adults have suffered essential cuts in funding.

Integration, social cohesion and national identity

The concept of integration is conceptually problematic. In the immigration/incorporation discourse integration has quite often been understood as an individual property. This approach has been popularised by social psychologists (among others John Berry) that have operationalized integration in terms of participation in mainstream society in the economic (educational) sphere but maintaining traditional language and values in the private sphere. (Why is the issue put in terms of cultural maintenance and not in terms of cultural development?) Other acculturative options or strategies according to this theory are assimilation, separation and marginalisation. Berry’s conceptualisation represents a static view. Milton Gordon offered a more dynamic, but still essentially individualistic understanding of integration. He proposed that integration might be understood as a stage on the way to full assimilation.

A more fruitful approach is systemic and holistic. According to this view integration is not a concept that refers to individual elements but to a system. It is the system that is more or less integrated, not its components. If we transfer this idea to sociology, integration refers to society as a whole (or subsections of society), not to individual people. A society can be more or less integrated, not the individual. This is a question with which the classic writers of sociology concerned themselves (Weber, Simmel, Durkheim). Weber’s analysis of power and authority, and Durkheim’s analyses of solidarity provide us with important insights into the workings of integration and social cohesion.

Swedish self-understanding

Swedish society is often stated to have been ethnically and culturally homogeneous before the onset of post-war migration. Immigration, it is claimed, ruptured this cultural, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity. A very first step in the process of gaining acceptance for diversity policies must therefore be to question and problematize this national self-understanding as the basic myth upon which the Swedish nation state is founded.
The territory of the present Swedish state consists of seven core provinces around the big lakes of what is now regarded as central Sweden. Three provinces in the far south and three in the west were incorporated into the Swedish state through conquest in a number of 17th century wars against Denmark and Norway. The subjugation of the Danish and Norwegian populations was brutal but effective. Also the island province of Gotland, having had a semi-autonomous status since the Hanseatic days, was definitely incorporated into the Swedish state during the 17th century. During the course of several hundred years Swedish settlers colonized five northern provinces inhabited by Saami and Finns. The discriminatory treatment of the Saami and Finnish speaking populations in the north has continued to this day.

By European standards Sweden has a small population in a large territory. In historical times regional differences were obvious. This is seen in a broad range of dialects. Linguists even regard some of these dialects as separate languages. Traditionally language never served as an instrument for homogenisation. The one principal homogenizing factor was the Lutheran church. This was the one institution that virtually all citizens of the Swedish state had in common. Moreover, the church was strongly linked to political control. In fact, the reformation was used by Gustav Vasa (who reigned 1523-60) to centralize state power and control.

The myth of an historical cultural, ethnic and linguistic homogeneity needs to be understood as the construction it is serving to legitimate the power of the rising nation state. It is precisely this myth that racists and neo-Nazis have appropriated. Nationalists contrast this myth of a lost national cohesion and “solidarity” in the past with the allegedly chaotic consequences of multiculturalism today.

Citizenship

A crucial instrument in all this is citizenship. Although Swedish citizenship follows the *ius sanguinis* principle, policies have been to encourage and facilitate naturalization of permanent residents. In a European context Sweden has liberal naturalization rules; five years of permanent residence (two for Nordic citizens, four years for refugees), no language or knowledge tests are required.

However, in everyday language the term “Swedish” refers less to citizenship and membership of the state and more to an ethnic identity. As yet there exists no recognized way of distinguishing between “Swedish” as referring to ethnicity or to citizenship. Naturalized Swedish citizens tend not be regarded as real or genuine Swedes in the way that migrants to the US are unconditionally accepted as Americans once they have US citizenship. An essential task, which implies something more than inventing a new term, is to find a way of attributing Swedishness to all citizens of the state irrespective of culture, creed, skin colour or language. The problem is not one of finding an appropriate term. That can surely be done. The problem is one of ensuring popular acceptance for it, which can only be achieved if an understanding of what it means to be Swedish is reformulated. Basically, then, it means to rethink the national story taking account of the various historical events that went in to forming the
Swedish state, the peoples that historically became part of its population either through immigration, conquest or colonization. The story needs to be brought up to date to include also those who have come to this country during the past fifty years. Moreover, Swedishness needs to be rethought in the context of European integration.

Rethinking the national story is a task that involves society as a whole. It is not merely about a limited number of policy recommendations. Rather it has implications for policies in every field of human interaction. Representation and visibility are two key issues. Differences should not be downplayed, hushed up or locked in. They should be seen as a normal state of affairs. Media representation is important in affecting general stereotypes, but even more important is political representation.

What should replace the nationalistic myth? Well, the answer is fairly straightforward and in line with moves that Sweden has already taken: respect for human rights, equality, equity, justice, solidarity, democracy, non-discrimination and the liberal freedoms of speech, the press, assembly and organization. These are core values that are necessary but not sufficient conditions for social cohesion in a multicultural society.

Avoiding conflicting interests and views, concealing them or ignoring them, does not bring about social cohesion. On the contrary, conflict in terms of differences in interest, perspective or ambition has a part to play in generating social cohesion. Thus, social cohesion is not the equivalent of consensus. The formidable task is to develop means of handling social conflict and differences of interest in a civilized way, which means respecting the opposite view and working towards a resolution that both parties may accept. We have obvious models right before our eyes in the parliamentary process, and in how labour market conflicts are handled. Social cohesion is brought about by mutual interdependence on a societal scale as Durkheim correctly observed. The broad policy objective of a society that professes itself an adherent of diversity is then to enable such interdependence. An important element of such an objective is empowerment of those who are at risk, those who are vulnerable and those who are the underdogs of society.
A final observation

There is of course also an element of historical continuity that we need to see. In closing I cannot resist paraphrasing Gunnar Myrdal and point to *A Swedish Dilemma*. It is about the coexistence of and conflict between the historically based and popular egalitarian tradition on the one hand, and, on the other, a subtle but bureaucratic and sometimes arrogant exercise of power, often full of good intentions but almost always streamlining solutions that don't take the little man’s experiences and wishes into account, nor those of marginalised minority groups. The sterilisation policy that was practised for forty years right up until 1976 is one example of this Big Brother ideology. It was precisely the absence of a feudal system that laid the foundations of an exceptionally strong central power, in earlier centuries invested in the Crown, in modern times in an independent, powerful, and centralised bureaucracy. The difficulties that multiculturalism has faced in Sweden must be understood in terms of these historically rooted contradictions.