

HISTORISK TIDSKRIFT
(Sweden)

132:4 • 2012

Images of Sweden

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Nikolas Glover, *National relations: public diplomacy, national identity and the Swedish Institute 1945–1970* (Lund: Nordic Academic Press 2011). 287 p.

For a relatively small country, Sweden generated considerable international interest during the twentieth century. The Swedish model has been widely studied both inside and outside Sweden and it has become very influential as a central component of Swedish national identity in the post-war period. The construction of the Swedish model was never one-sided, however. In his book *Roots of the Scandinavian model*, Kazimierz Musiał explored how ideas about the Scandinavian model in the 1930s were formed at the intersection of what he calls auto- and xenostereotypes.¹ Foreign perceptions of Sweden and Scandinavia as a political “middle way” – most famously in the American journalist Marquis Childs’ bestselling book of the same title in 1936 – were mirrored by a growing self-consciousness within different Swedish organisations and institutions about the presentation of the nation to the outside world.

Hitherto, the xenostereotypes have probably attracted more interest from researchers than the autostereotypes. Historical studies of travel writing during the twentieth century but also earlier have contributed to our knowledge of how the outside world saw Sweden and the Nordic countries. At the same time there is also a large body of research on nation-building and the internal construction of national identity, in Sweden as in other European countries. But we still know relatively little about how the idea

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1. Kazimierz Musiał, *Roots of the Scandinavian model: images of progress in the era of modernisation* (Baden-Baden 2002).

of the nation was constructed and presented for external consumption. Nikolas Glover's doctoral thesis contributes to filling that gap, examining the construction and communication of the Swedish autostereotype. The thesis takes as its subject the Swedish Institute (Svenska Institutet) and studies the evolution of its efforts to represent and communicate ideas about Sweden abroad during what was perhaps the heyday of the Swedish model, the period 1945–1970. Following studies of similar institutions, like the British Council and the United States Information Agency (USIA), Glover's aim is to examine "how the Swedish Institute related Sweden to the world" (p. 7) through its efforts in the field of public diplomacy and communication. In doing so, he also seeks to "prob[e]... notions of national uniqueness" (p. 7), thus illuminating the debate about Swedish exceptionalism during the period of the Cold War.

Glover tackles his problem through a detailed empirical study, using the archival sources of the Swedish Institute itself, as well as of related organisations including the Press Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and of *Upplysningsberedningen och kollegiet för Sverige-informationen i utlandet* (translated in the thesis as Enlightenment Committee/Information Collegium). In addition to these sources, the thesis draws on the personal archives of some of the Institute's most prominent directors, and their correspondence with other bodies. There is also some detailed analysis of some of the most important materials that it produced, including the television series *Face of Sweden* (1962), the book *Sweden in the Sixties* (1967) and the 1969 exhibition *Images of Sweden*.

The thesis is logically organised in chronological fashion. Following a very clear introduction and a brief discussion of ideas about public diplomacy before 1945, the central four chapters of the book present the evolution of the Swedish Institute as it adapted to the changing circumstances of the post-war era. Changes in internal organisation, the funding structure and relations with other governmental and non-governmental bodies are analysed in tandem with the changes in the Institute's methods and strategy.

Chapter 3 deals with the foundation of the Institute in 1945 and early developments up to 1953, with a particular focus on the relationship between the Institute and the Tourist Traffic Association. A recurring theme in the analysis is the tension between more general representations of the nation and more overtly commercial ones, for the purposes of tourism or other economic exports. So too is the tension between the national imperative – in this case as part of wider international policy and strategy during the early Cold War – and the anti-nationalist notion that "enlightenment" work would answer more universal needs in the service of the post-war

world. Chapter 4 examines a period of relative stability during the period 1954–1962, when the involvement of the commercial export sector expanded considerably. Glover shows how these interests overlapped with the growth in international development aid, and the perception of neutral Sweden acting as a force for good in the world. He also discusses the rather slippery and problematic notion of the national image, which indeed proved to be so elusive that a project to pin it down had to be abandoned, and was replaced instead by a move towards the "personification of the nation" in the series of self-portraits presented in *Face of Sweden*.

Chapter 5 deals with the major re-organisation of the Swedish Institute in the early 1960s, driven by a shift away from the commercial business sector and instead a more explicit link to foreign policy, driven partly by the need to counter anti-neutral feeling especially in the United States following the emergence of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) in 1959. The much longer chapter 6 covers the remainder of the 1960s. It examines the Institute's work in the context of a new political and ideological emphasis on culture and cultural policy, which in turn gave rise to a new notion of what culture itself actually was. A further internal re-organisation saw the Institute retain its formal independence from the state, but more emphasis was placed on the role of professional experts in communication, schooled in the methods and language of public relations. The cultural debates are illustrated with two longish sections analysing first the controversy and scandal surrounding a commissioned exhibition from the artist Pär Stolpe in 1969, and the book *Sweden in the Sixties* from 1967. In my opinion, these are some of the best sections in the thesis: the analysis is engaging and stimulating and provides many very interesting insights.

Finally, in chapter 7 the main shifts in the work of the Institute are recapitulated and summarised, and in chapter 8 they are skilfully connected to a discussion of the broader historical context. Glover describes the central tension in the Swedish Institute as being between the commercial interests of the export sector on the one hand, and broader ideas about national culture on the other, but he wisely concludes that representations of the nation were always political, even when conceived and presented as apolitical. He summarises the main changes in the Swedish Institute's work as an evolution from blueprint to personification to interpretation. The "enlightenment" work of the immediate post-war years, in the form of books written by experts, gave way to the broader idea of the image: "emotive, subjective, fickle and ephemeral" (p. 187). In the 1960s, however, the politicisation of the concept of culture meant that the elusive and slippery *Sverigebilden* was replaced by plural *Sverigebilder*, with communication of these images increasingly managed by professional communication experts.

It should be made quite clear that the thesis goes far beyond the purely narrative in its ambitions and its findings, and Glover uses his analysis of the Swedish Institute to address a number of important and over-arching themes. As is evident from the title, the thesis seeks to make a contribution to the history of public diplomacy. Glover suggests that most historical studies of public diplomacy have focused on the traditional realm of politics – its institutions, ideologies and actors – while ignoring the central role of communication. Yet, as he puts it, “the history of national relations is entwined with the social history of communication” (p. 13) and his ambition therefore is “to insert the history of communication into the historical studies of public diplomacy.” Following John Durham Peters, Glover sets out some important shifts in the meanings of communication over the twentieth century (pp. 37ff) and the legacy of the two world wars in shaping these developments, in particular what he terms “communication as therapy”: the universal spread of education and enlightenment would help to solve global problems. This ambition was not confined to the work of international organisations such as UNESCO but could also be found in national ones like the Swedish Institute. Glover also makes a further distinction, following Hannah Pitkin, between the dual task of public diplomacy as “acting for” – that is, representing – the nation on the one hand and “acting as” it on the other, that is describing or mirroring it. The Swedish Institute was clearly meant to do both. But returning to this point in his conclusion Glover seeks to complicate this distinction further: as he points out, there was nothing fixed or taken for granted about the nation that was to be represented – and how that was debated and how it evolved is also a matter for study.

These are subtle and complex distinctions, and although the passages where they are discussed occasionally read a little less smoothly than one might have hoped, on the whole Glover handles them extremely well as analytical tools to steer his research. He could perhaps have gone further in reflecting on the implications of the Swedish Institute as a case study to illuminate more generally debates about public diplomacy and the institutions that are engaged in this type of communication in a wider comparative context. There are brief references to the British Council and the USIA for example, but these are not discussed in any detail. The thesis deals critically with the notion of national exceptionalism, but the field of study raises further questions about Sweden as an exceptional case historically. The Swedish Institute operated in very different circumstances to those of USIA or the British Council: representing a small nation and a small language; and a neutral nation without the obligations associated with a declining empire and decolonisation or with neo-imperialist ambitions to global hegemony. Although a detailed comparison was beyond the scope of this doctoral pro-

ject, some further reflections on the comparative context would have added another welcome angle to this particular question.

The study is also necessarily restricted by the decision to concentrate on materials that the Institute produced for its English-language audience, especially in the USA. This is entirely reasonable of course, but it would have also been interesting to learn the proportion of the material in English compared to those in other languages and the circumstances that influenced decisions about this. Moreover, although the analysis of the content of these materials is excellent, less is said about their reception by the audiences for which they were intended. Were they reviewed and if so what did the reviewers say? In other words – to return to Musial's terms – what was the influence of the xenostereotype in shaping the autostereotypes constructed and exported by the Swedish Institute? The role of diasporic communities is widely acknowledged as influential in shaping the construction and reception of national self-images for other groups: did second-generation Swedish-Americans for example also have a role to play here?

The cultural debates of the 1960s are discussed in some depth, but it would also be interesting to give some consideration to the role of the arts in mediating Sweden's image abroad. The literature of a relatively small language may find it harder to cross national boundaries than that which is written in English, French or German, though that has not prevented the crime fiction of Henning Mankell and Stieg Larsson from having an enormous influence in generating interest in Sweden in our own times. But there were other influential media: firstly architecture and design had some influence in shaping the image of Sweden or more broadly of Norden, even before the ubiquity of IKEA as a global brand. Secondly there is cinema: for art-house cinema goes throughout Europe during the 1960s Ingmar Bergman was an immensely important influence, not least perhaps in helping to construct the popular xenostereotypes of melancholy and sexual liberation.

The question of national identity and national exceptionalism is one of the main themes of chapters 7 and 8. Summarising the changing images of Sweden – from (in his terms) blueprint to personification to interpretation; from image of Sweden to images – Glover very sensibly concludes that there was never a static definition of national culture, nor was there any fixed way of communicating it. Most interestingly, he suggests that “relating the nation's uniqueness is necessarily also relating its normalcy” (p. 205). In the case of Sweden this meant relating national identity to an expanding “transnational scientised culture” (p. 211) in a nation that was, like the USA, “self-consciously and universally modern.” If I interpret this correctly, this means that Swedish national identity lay in its anti-nationalism, and in the antipathy towards the idea of a nation as a primordial entity: instead it was

conceived as a "generic, rational, universally applicable model." Quite rightly, in my view, Glover takes a critical stance towards the idea of Swedish exceptionalism, suggesting (p. 201) that "there has never been a timeless, agreed definition of national culture." That said, it is striking how certain themes seem to recur when discussing Swedish auto- and xenostereotypes: consensus; the love of compromise over ideological dogmatism; the preference for peaceful and evolutionary resolution of conflicts. I would have liked to have seen a more explicit discussion of this point: how seriously should scholars take these long-established notions of Swedish exceptionalism, and how can we acknowledge the power and influence of these notions while at the same time treating them critically?

The study also sheds some interesting light on the role of different interests in the Swedish state in at the height of social democratic hegemony. Through his careful and detailed reconstruction of successive debates surrounding the organisation and funding of the Swedish Institute, Glover is able to show the constant shifting balance between the private interests of the commercial export sector, and the public diplomacy concerns of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its other institutions, though I did wonder about the potential role of other groups and interests outside this divide. The Swedish Institute remained independent, but its relationship to both sectors, and most importantly the main sources of its funding were constantly shifting. Perhaps above all, this study complicates the notion of social democratic hegemony in Sweden during the period when the party was politically dominant, because if this was hegemony there seems to be relatively little sign of its influence in external communications. It would perhaps be interesting to take the story beyond 1970 to the change of government in 1976, and moreover to the period of Olof Palme's activism in international affairs.

To summarise, Nikolas Glover's thesis breaks new ground, firstly and above all in its presentation of a comprehensive and detailed empirical study of the politics and development of the Swedish Institute in the period 1945–1970. The source material has been aptly selected and critically analysed, though some analysis of the reception of the Swedish Institute and its target audiences outside Sweden would have further illuminated the transnational significance of its findings. I would also have liked to have seen more discussion of the different national and above all linguistic contexts in which the Institute worked: the reliance on English-language materials is slightly limiting perhaps. But one cannot do everything in one doctoral thesis. Glover sets out a complex theoretical framework in his introduction, and manages to connect this successfully to the analysis of his empirical material, while also acknowledging the dangers of imposing a rigid schema on complicated historical material. He is at his best in his lively and detailed

analysis of some key texts, and also in summarising and contextualising the evolution of the Institute's work in the final two chapters. Generally, however, the thesis is mostly clearly expressed, and I would like in particular to commend his thoughtful reflections on the translation of problematic terms such as *upplysning*. In short, this is an excellent thesis which in my judgement will make a significant contribution to our understanding of post-war Swedish history.