

Influence and Presence, Depth and Surface: Studying the American Impact on Other Countries

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Vingåker, Sweden is not Plains, Georgia

During the Swedish election campaign of 2002, Cecilia Uddén, Washington correspondent for Swedish National Public Radio, made a journey through Sweden looking at her native country “through the eyes of America.” Uddén afterwards did a series of reports highlighting differences and similarities in the way contemporary election campaigns are conducted in Sweden and in the United States. One of the places she visited was Vingåker, a small community in Sörmland county known mainly as the birthplace of Swedish Prime Minister Göran Persson.

The reporter arrived in Vingåker in late August, 2002, at the height of the campaign, and was immediately struck by one thing: nothing in the community told a passing visitor that the current prime minister of Sweden had been born there. No matter how closely Uddén looked, she could not find any sculptural monuments of the prime minister, no security people guarding the house where he was born and where his mother and father still lived, not one shop where tourists could buy souvenir cups or plates with the prime minister’s autograph and photo, no Göran Persson “theme park,” not even a sign designating his childhood home “The house where Göran Persson was born.”

Asking Vingåker locals about this in interviews, the reporter discov-

ered people were not in the least concerned or surprised over the lack of Persson memorabilia; rather, they found this natural and proper. But were they not proud of their native son? the reporter asked. Not especially, most of them said; to use the word "proud" would be to exaggerate, and make it too "person-oriented," one interviewee explained.

A lady working at the local tourist office told the reporter that in 1996 when Persson first became prime minister, her office had set up a guided tour to take visitors to the house where Persson was born, and from there to Katrineholm, the nearby city where he was head of the local government in the 1980's. The tour ended in Harpsund at the present official residence of the prime minister. But they had to cancel the tour, the tourist guide said, "because no one signed up for it." No official recognition of Persson exists in the area except for an old portrait hanging in a long line of portrait-photos of past local government chairpersons in the Katrineholm town hall.

Using the example of Jimmy Carter's Plains, Georgia as a comparison, Uddén went on to describe how different things are in the United States, where former presidents have their own libraries featuring their presidential papers as well as a plethora of commercial products. The city of Plains thrives on Jimmy Carter tourism and memorabilia, for example. Everywhere in Plains one can buy Jimmy Carter cups, plates, and other kind of souvenirs.

Things are obviously very different in Vingåker, Sweden. While Göran Persson's 91-year old father sort of admitted that his son had made it big ("Yes, it was a good do," he finally responded to the reporter's insistent questioning about the son's achievements), the elder Persson also dismissed all comparison with America saying that in Sweden, "we are colder than [people] are in the U.S."¹

Here then is the case of a prominent reporter accustomed to the usual hoopla of the American campaign with all the balloons, rallies, political ads, and big convention speeches, being startled by how different the Swedish political culture can be, particularly at the local level. She found vast differences not just in the absence of material things, of gadgets and

1. Cecilia Uddén, "Sverige med amerikanska ögon: Vingåker – Göran Persson, bygdens son", P1 morgon, Sveriges Radio (Sweden's National Public Radio), August 30, 2002.

products, but also in terms of attitudes and values displayed by ordinary people.

An "Americanization" of Swedish Politics?

Cecilia Uddén's journalistic account corresponds neatly with a thesis I have been arguing for for more than a decade in a series of articles and papers. The argument is that it may well be the case that certain spheres of contemporary Swedish society have been influenced in tangible ways by American ideas, trends, and products; this is particularly true for example in the areas of fast food, popular culture, music, television, and in parts of the business world. As for Swedish politics in general, however, including the country's political culture (which is really what the Vingåker example is all about), I argue that the impact of specifically *American* ideas and practices has been minimal. This is true because of particular attitudes and beliefs shared by a majority of Swedes, a matter I will return to shortly, but it is also true because there are important institutional and structural barriers to an "Americanization" of Swedish politics. The most important of these barriers are the Swedish party system, Sweden's ban on televised political commercials, and the nature of the country's political culture.²

Certain foreign observers of Swedish politics tend however to look quite differently at these matters. I will give two examples, each of which involves an American scholar. The first is that of Jerry Hagstrom, a contributing editor to the *National Journal*. Hagstrom followed the 1991 Swedish election campaign and was surprised to see how "American-

2. Erik Åsard, "Election Campaigns in Sweden and in the United States: Convergence or Divergence?," *American Studies in Scandinavia*, No. 2, 1989, 70-85; "Why is Swedish Politics so Thoroughly 'Swedish'?" in Rolf Lundén and Erik Åsard, eds., *Networks of Americanization: Aspects of the American Influence in Sweden* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1992), 161-171; "Not So 'Americanized' After All? A Comparison of Political Campaign Ads in Sweden and the United States," paper presented at the International Conference in Amsterdam on "Images of Politics," October 23-25, 1997; "The Limits of 'Americanization' in Swedish Politics," *The Swedish-American Historical Quarterly*, No. 3, 1999, 173-181; "Americanization or Globalization? Themes and Topics in a Recurring Debate," in Kerstin W. Shands, Rolf Lundén, and Dag Blanck, eds., *Notions of America: Swedish Perspectives* (Stockholm: Södertörn Academic Studies, forthcoming).

ized" it was. In particular, he thought the media coverage and the excessive focus on the party leaders closely resembled what has now become the norm in U.S. campaigns.³

The second example is that of Thomas E. Patterson, a Harvard University professor of political science. In 2002, Patterson published a book called *The Vanishing Voter*, where he and a group of fellow scholars at the John F. Kennedy School of Government seek to explain why increasing numbers of American voters are turning away from participatory politics. Among the group's conclusions is that media bias, the endlessly long campaign season, the primary system, negative campaigning, and various institutional obstacles all combine to deter many Americans from voting.⁴

In a related article written for a leading Swedish daily, Patterson wrote that the U.S.A. may be an extreme case, but that similar trends are evident in many European countries. "The Swedes," Patterson admonished, "ought to be concerned about the 'Americanization' of the election campaigns in Europe." He added that candidate-oriented campaigns, run by political consultants, are becoming increasingly common throughout the European continent. And such campaigns, he stated, are met with increasing voter disgust in the United States.⁵

The problem with these analyses is that the authors have a tendency to exaggerate the changes they see and too readily attribute them to a specific center, the United States. What Hagstrom and Patterson seem to forget is that we are dealing with a highly complex process that entails not only dimensions of adoption or imitation, but also of adaptation, transformation, and feedback. Ideas, trends, and products flow back and forth between nations and across continents, and how they become adapted, rejected, and transformed differs from case to case and from country to country.

It is certainly true that Swedish society changed considerably during the 1990's. If we look at the political sphere only, the party system is not

3. Jerry Hagstrom, "Riktning USA, inte Europa: svensk politik har amerikaniserats," *Dagens Nyheter*, October 5, 1991, A4.

4. Thomas E. Patterson, *The Vanishing Voter: Public Involvement in an Age of Uncertainty* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002).

5. Thomas E. Patterson, "'Amerikanisering borde bekymra Sverige'," *Dagens Nyheter*, November 17, 2002, A4.

as strong today as it used to be; party membership is declining whereas voter distrust of parties and politicians is on the increase. Voter turnout is also slowly decreasing, although it is still fairly high comparatively speaking.⁶ In the late 1990's the largest non-socialist opposition party, the Conservative Party or *Moderaterna*, launched policies that can be said to "bear the clear markings of an American origin and accent."⁷ For example, the party put forward proposals for a so-called flat tax, for a "three strikes and you're out" policy on crime, and for a kind of welfare reform modeled on the American example. However, these policy changes have yet to win the support of other parties in the Swedish parliament.⁸

Sweden has furthermore a more candidate-oriented system of voting than previously (in Swedish called *personval*), where voters have the option of casting their vote not only for a party but in addition for a particular candidate of their choice. But for this to have the effect of electing a candidate to Parliament, the candidate has to get at least eight percent of the party's vote, something which has proved to be very difficult, especially in major cities. Consequently, few voters bother to vote for an individual candidate and instead cast a pure party-vote. According to official statistics, only 25.98 percent of Swedish voters voted for a specific candidate for Parliament in 2002, which is down from 29.9 percent in 1998, when the more candidate-oriented voting system was instituted. Only 10 candidates were elected in this way in 2002, a drop from 12 candidates in 1998.⁹ Thus, a majority of Swedish voters do not seem interested in this reform. Party operatives are skeptical of the new system too; they seem anxious to keep their control over the nominating process.

Several of the changes discussed here have taken place since Sweden joined the European Union in 1995.¹⁰ The question is not then whether

6. Voter turnout in Swedish parliamentary elections has gone down from a high of 91.7 percent in 1976 to 80.1 percent in 2002. Arne Halvarson, Kjell Lundmark, and Ulf Staberg, *Sveriges statskick: Fakta och perspektiv* (Stockholm: Liber, 2003), 82.

7. This is the definition of "Americanization" given by James B. Gilbert in his *Explorations of American Culture* (Uppsala: Uppsala North American Studies Series 2, Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2000), 101.

8. Erik Åsard, "'Moderatledarens västervridning,'" *Dagens Nyheter*, May 22, 2000, A4.

9. The figures come from the Central Election Authority (*Valmyndigheten*) in Stockholm, telephone interview, December 4, 2002. There are 349 seats in the Swedish parliament.

10. Cf. Olof Petersson, Ulrika Mörth, Johan P. Olsen, and Jonas Tallberg, *Demokratirådets rapport 2003: Demokrati i EU* (Stockholm: SNS Förlag, 2003).

Swedish and European politics have changed during the last decade, but what the changes that have come about mean and what they portend for the future. In particular it is unclear whether the changes are part of a general *international* development that affects not just Europe but other continents as well, or whether they emanate from a single country, the United States. In short, are we witnessing an "Americanization," or a globalization, of today's international politics? This is an important issue and one that clearly merits further investigation.

Influence and Presence, Depth and Surface

How do we move beyond the simple labeling of ideas and practices, beyond calling something the product of "Americanization" or globalization? I want to conclude by emphasizing two basic distinctions that I believe should be observed in our research on American influences in different countries: between *influence* and *presence* on the one hand, and between *depth* and *surface* on the other. If we are going to successfully study processes of influence, we shall have to get beyond the matter of presence. And if we are intent on reaching some kind of depth, we must try to get below the surface level.

We need to recognize that the process of "Americanization" is above all an issue of cultural change, of the transmission and transformation of ideas, trends, and products. At the heart of this process is the cultural interaction that takes place in what has been called the "contact zone," where ideas that appear in a country become altered, modified, hybridized, or sometimes rejected.¹¹ But what then is culture? In large measure it has to do with how people behave and with what they believe in. To properly study the impact of American television on viewers in the Scandinavian countries, for example, we must not only investigate how many U.S.-made or U.S.-inspired programs there are on Danish, Finnish, Icelandic, Norwegian, and Swedish TV – the *presence* issue. It is equally important to find out how much television people in those countries

11. For more about the dynamics of cultural transfer and the term "contact zone," see Helle Porsdam's contribution to this issue.

watch, what kind of programs they watch, and specifically what they think about those programs – the *influence* issue. As part of such a study it would also be helpful to incorporate data indicating what Scandinavians think of the U.S. in general, and of American ideals and the American way of life.

I am arguing for the importance of using comparative survey-data, which shows peoples' values in different countries and how the values have developed over time. One comparative survey-data series of long standing is the *European Values Study/World Values Study*. The series began in 1981 and gives a good overview of fundamental value patterns in many countries, primarily in the Western world. Another series is the *International Social Survey Program* (ISSP). The researchers responsible for the ISSP series have been making annual surveys of peoples' attitudes in over 20 countries since the mid-1980's.¹²

My point in emphasizing the importance of studying citizen values is this: if we want to go beyond making casual observations about the transmission and transformation of ideas, if we are interested in matters of influence and not just of presence, in questions of depth rather than surface issues, then obviously we have to do more than simply study texts or interpret signs and images. We must also examine the beliefs of ordinary people, and their views on institutional as well as value changes, when we ask questions about whether, how, and to what degree American ideas and practices are affecting the societies we live in. Only by incorporating the views of average citizens into our research agendas will it be possible for us to reach a deeper understanding of the "Americanization" phenomenon.

12. Some results from these surveys are presented in Stefan Svallfors, *Välfärdsstatens moraliska ekonomi: välfärdsopinionen i 90-talets Sverige* (Umeå: Boréa, 1996).