

America and the Future of Sweden: Americanization as Controlled Modernization

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The subject-matter of this article is a short account of and some reflections on the Swedish views on Americanization and the impact of the United States from around 1900 to the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. I will begin by saying a few words about modernization and Americanization.

The term "modernization" has often been used to denote some specific trends of development, such as industrialization, urbanization, and rationalization. In retrospect it may be fair to call these tendencies "modern," but in the last decades scholars have increasingly stressed that there is no single way to modernity; the modernization process does not look exactly the same everywhere, and there is no way of predicting with certainty where it will lead.¹ This is true today and it was true also in the past. Thus, to call those "anti-modern" who criticized the development which has led us to where we are today may not always be accurate. In many cases, the critics also wanted change and progress, but progress to them meant something other than that which afterwards has come to be looked upon as *the* modern development. I intend to use the concept here as rep-

1. Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Modernisierungstheorie und Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1975), 36-37 and 61. Bo Stråth, *The Organisation of Labour Markets: Modernity, Culture and Governance in Germany, Sweden, Britain and Japan* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 1-26.

representing a vision of a future that is different from both the past and the present, regardless of the contents of this vision, which may differ substantially from case to case.

“Americanization” is a term that has been used – and sometimes abused – in many different ways. Sometimes it has been taken to represent a process whereby the United States forces its own culture and ways of thinking on other nations. In other contexts, it has simply been identified with modernization. In this view, modernization has been associated with the United States due to the fact that its effects have revealed themselves somewhat earlier there than in Europe. Today, however, it seems to be more common to identify Americanization with a direct borrowing from the U.S. of ideas, institutions, methods, or cultural phenomena whose American origin stands out plainly.² In accordance with this definition, I will let the term stand for a direct borrowing of things that are or are believed to be American.

These conceptual comments have some bearing on what I have to say. In my research, I have studied Swedish discussions on America and Americanization in the period from about 1900 to 1939.³ During the first half of this period, there was a great debate in Sweden concerning the emigration to America and how to put an end to it. Emigration was believed to drain Sweden of its workforce and to impede the country’s economic development. Although some participants in this debate denied that the U.S. had any real advantages over Sweden, most agreed that in fact it was a more highly developed country and that Sweden had to reduce this development gap if it was to survive as a nation. Economic and social reforms and a national revival were considered imperative in order for Sweden to prepare for the future. First of all, Swedish agriculture had to expand, it was thought. Here, the United States was frequently hailed as a model. The American colonization of the West stood as an

2. Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger, “Introduction,” in Heide Fehrenbach and Uta G. Poiger (eds.), *Transactions, Transgressions, Transformations: American Culture in Western Europe and Japan* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2000), xiii-xiv, xxvi; Gilbert, James, *Explorations of American Culture* (Uppsala: Swedish Institute for North American Studies, Uppsala University, 2001), 101-05.

3. Martin Alm *Americanitis: Amerika som sjukdom eller läkemedel: Svenska berättelser om USA åren 1900-1939* (Lund: Department of History, Lund University), 2003. This text may be seen as a brief outline and elucidation of some points from this book.

example to the unenterprising Swedes, many people claimed.⁴ But improvements in agriculture did not suffice; Swedish industry needed to develop as well. American industry would show the way, and the able and disciplined workforce of this industry was considered exemplary.⁵ Finally, the Americans showed the way in the efficient construction of inexpensive houses and residencies, which was believed to be a very important factor in the creation of a content and thriving working class.⁶

In the emigration debate, large groups within the Swedish political, economic and cultural elites formulated a modernist vision: Sweden must reform its economy and society and render them more effective. It was framed in a narrative about decay and progress. Contemporary Sweden was thought to have sunk into a state of decay, which would have to be turned into progress by means of an injection of American energy and enterprising spirit. The Americans stood for what the Swedes needed most of all: a willingness to do practical work. The U.S. was looked up to as the pioneer of technology and efficient working methods that Sweden should emulate.

The central value emphasized by this narrative of a Swedish modernization was that of rallying behind the nation and working in solidarity to promote its prosperity. Class envy and political strife were to be put aside for the sake of the common good. This modernization process was to be strictly controlled, however: an American-inspired enterprising spirit should be introduced, but the government would at the same time secure order and stability in society.

By and large, this vision of modernity was shared by most participants in the public debate at the time. However, there were certain noticeable differences between conservatives and liberals. Conservatives like Rudolf Kjellén and Adrian Molin wanted a material and economical

4. G. H. von Koch, *Emigranternas land: Studier i amerikanskt samhällslif* (Stockholm: AB Ljus, 1910), 238-39, 245, 329-30, 333-34, 337; Adrian Molin, *Vanhäfd: Inlägg i emigrationsfrågan* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner, 1911), 121-22; *Emigrationsutredningen* (Stockholm: P. A. Norstedt & Söner), appendix XVII (1909), 18, 21, 45, 48, 67, 110, 112, 154, 168, 173, 184, 192, 197; appendix XIX (1910), 96-97; appendix XX (1911), 136; report (1913), 664, 734.

5. *Emigrationsutredningen*, appendix XIX, 20, 95, 104, 109; appendix XV (1908), 7, 10-12, 19, 24, 27, 31; appendix XVI (1911), 118, 170; appendix XVIII (1910), 10-12; report, 699, 766; Paul Peter Waldenström, *Nya färder i Amerikas Förenta stater* (Stockholm: AB Normans förlag, 1902), 230; Adrian Molin, *Svenska spörsml och kraf* (Stockholm: Hugo Gebers förlag, 1906), 147-49.

6. Adrian Molin, *Vanhäfd*, 39, 43-47, 51-52. "Kriget och emigrationen," *Hem i Sverige* (1916: 3), 1-3.

modernization of Sweden, and to this end they were looking for models in America. Their ambition was to reform in order to conserve. By Americanizing Sweden in certain respects, they wanted to save other social institutions and ideals, that they thought worthy of preservation, by giving them a firm material base able to sustain their legitimacy. In their view, the U.S. represented an admirable efficiency and work ethics, but its democracy and materialistic culture were not considered desirable. A complex modern society required a firm leadership which democracy was unable to offer. In this conservative vision, economic modernization, which was to be modeled largely on American conditions, was a weapon in the struggle against spiritual or cultural modernity.⁷

Liberals like Ernst Beckman and G.H. von Koch did not advocate a complete Americanization of Sweden either, but they did not draw the line at American democracy or culture. They claimed that democracy was a condition for the cultivation of a communal spirit and national solidarity. The U.S. demonstrated this. Some liberals thought that the social reform movements in early 20th century America, with "social settlements" and other initiatives, were also a good model for Sweden.⁸

Swedish Social Democrats disliked American capitalism, but like the liberals they could approve of American democracy. The introduction of democracy might make possible a peaceful transformation of society and thus prevent revolution, some of them thought. According to this view, America showed a way to a peaceful form of modernization.⁹

7. Waldenström, *Nya färder i Amerikas Förenta stater*, 315-16 and 475; Emil Kleen, *Ströftåg och irrfärder hos min vän Yankee Doodle (samt amorstüdes)*, part II (Stockholm: Nordin & Josephson, 1903), 159-68, 170, 174-76, 196; Rudolf Kjellén, "'Kejsar Roosevelt': Anmärkningar om Förenta staternas författningsfråga," *Templarordens studiebibliotek* (1907: IV), 248-52; Adrian Molin, *Svenska spörmål och kraf*, pp. 17-18, 41, 67-69, 85-87, 99-100, 109, 139, 145-46.

8. E. H. Thörnberg, "Den svällande emigrantfloden," *Svenska Dagbladet* 6/8 1902; *Emigrationsutredningen*, appendix XVIII, 82; appendix XIX, 47, 57; report, 836, 840, 843, 890; G. H. von Koch, *Emigranternas land*, 52-53, 143-53, 159-69, 184, 187-88, 264-76.

9. August Palm, *Ögonblicksbilder från en tripp till Amerika* (Stockholm: published by the author, 1901), 51-52, 59, 71-72, 82, 88-89, 91, 99, 118, 130-31, 142, 1464-7, 210-11, 240-41, 243; "Emigrationen," *Social-Demokraten* 1/2 1907; "Roosevelt," *Social-Demokraten* 7/5 1910.

The Interwar Years: Economical Debates

In the interwar years, Swedish conservatives and liberals played down the role of government in the economy and converged in a favorable view of American capitalism. Private initiative and free enterprise would realize the dreams of economic prosperity from the emigration debate. Technology and material production would improve the lot of the mass of the people.¹⁰

Swedish engineers and technicians in particular attached great hopes to what they considered the American system of economic progress. American working methods with their emphasis on specialization and mechanization, notably Scientific Management and Fordism, were seen as the key to success. An increase in production promised to bring prosperity for all. Higher salaries and an increased consumption would solve the social conflicts, and the class struggle would perish. Through rationalization, national reconciliation and social harmony would prevail.¹¹

The political left, i.e., the Social Democrats and the Communists, generally condemned American capitalism, but the trade union movement gradually came to see the future in the light of an industrial rationalization, provided that the workers were given a fair share of the profits from these measures and that their degree of union organization did not decline. The idea of social stability through co-operation around new methods attracted many labor leaders as well.¹²

The employers were interested in rationalization but were more skeptical of the benefits of higher wages for the workers. Some elements in American economic life were applicable to Sweden, but others were not.¹³ However, Sweden eventually chose a way that built on the integra-

10. Leif Lewin, *Planhushållningsdebatten* (Stockholm: Alqvist & Wiksell, 1967), 12-16; "Amerika och Ryssland. En jämförelse värd att begrundas," *Ekonomi och politik: Skriftserie utgiven av Allmänna valmansförbundet* (Stockholm: Allmänna valmansförbundet, 1928), 1-4.

11. Olof Kärnekull, *Modern arbetsledning* (Stockholm: AB Svenska Teknologföreningens förlag, 1921), 6, 8, 10, 13, 26; Alex. Engblom, *Industriell organisation enligt den rationella arbetsledningens principer* (Stockholm: Natur och Kultur, 1922), 4, 27, 30, 34-40, 42, 106-26, 130, 159.

12. C. N. Carleson, "Amerikansk produktion och organisation," *Fackföreningsrörelsen* (1926: 30-34), 77, 80-81, 104-07, 127, 155 158, 198-99; "Vetenskaplig arbetsorganisation i Europa," *Fackföreningsrörelsen* (1927: 46), 479-81; Sigvard Cruse, "Rationaliseringen och fackföreningsrörelsen," *Fackföreningsrörelsen* (1929: II), 478-81.

13. "Den enda utvägen - minskning av produktionskostnaderna: Vittnesbörd utifrån," *Industria* (1923: 26), 137; "Industrins mekanisering, arbetslösheten och konflikterna," *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* 28/3 1928.

tion of the workers by economic growth and material benefits. The cooperation was framed in more collective forms than in the U.S., though.

The American New Deal policies from 1933 on softened the Swedish Social Democratic Party's attitude towards the U.S. considerably. Now, the workers seemed to increase their power in American society and their economic conditions improved relatively. In addition, the American government assumed a much needed responsibility for regulating and supervising the economy, as the Social Democrats saw it. Free enterprise had failed. There were several points of similarity between the New Deal and the policies of the Swedish Social Democratic government in the 1930s: public relief work paid with market wages, public support of agriculture, and an underbalancing of the budget. Swedish Social Democrats sometimes referred to the New Deal policies and their real or putative success in order to legitimate their own policies. In their view, the U.S. was showing the way to an orderly and controlled modernization, based on reform instead of revolution.¹⁴ Soon, however, Swedish Social Democrats were coming to believe that it was in fact Sweden that was showing the way for the U.S., and indeed for the rest of the world. They were strengthened in this belief by the panegyric works of Marquis W. Childs and some other American writers. The U.S. gradually became less of a model and more of an ally and a companion. Together, these two countries had set on a course leading out of the economic crisis of the 1930s, it was believed.¹⁵

The Interwar Years: Cultural Debates

American culture, that is American values and life-styles, was not viewed as favorably by all. Swedish cultural conservatives – conservatives taken

14. Al Vanner, "En ny giv – Roosevelt's krisprogram," *Fackföreningsrörelsen* (1933: II), 12; "Händelser och spörsmål: Konjunkturen i Amerika," *Tiden* (1934), 174, 176. Anna Lenah Elgström, *U.S.A. i örnens tecken* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1934), 18, 38, 74, 245, 248. Albert Viksten, *Guds eget land (God's own country)* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1938), 59, 152-54, 157.

15. Sten Ottosson, "Sverige som förebild: En diskussion om svenska självbilder med utgångspunkt från tre reseberättelser/reportage från andra hälften av 1930-talet," *Scandia* (2002: 1), 109-19; "Veckans perspektiv," *Fackföreningsrörelsen* (1936: II), 89; "Veckans perspektiv," *Fackföreningsrörelsen* (1938: II), 75-76.

in a wide sense – disliked the materialism, standardization, superficiality and intellectual levelling they associated with the U.S. and its “mass society,” as the critics construed it. In most cases, they did not question the benefits of technological and material development per se, nor the role played by the U.S. in this field, but they feared the values and the ways of life that might accompany this development. The means to withstand this threat were a strong defense of the Swedish, and to some extent European, cultural traditions. This defense was the responsibility of the educated classes in society. In their view of society as well it was hoped that modernization would be controlled: Americanization should be restricted to the economic field. Intellectuals like Adrian Molin and Sten Selander were hoping that American efficiency could be introduced without corrupting Swedish culture.¹⁶

Some cultural modernists, although they did not want to defend the tradition, agreed with the criticism of the perceived standardization and materialism in America.¹⁷ However, there were also influential modernists who found at least some forms of Americanization desirable even in a cultural or spiritual context. The United States, they argued, was a far more equal and perhaps more standardized society than the Swedish one, but Sweden was inevitably moving in the same direction. Hence, Sweden could learn something from the U.S. Modern society *was* a mass society like America. Still, like in most other views, modernization must be controlled. Individualism was untenable when faced with the challenges of modern society. It was necessary that the government would be able to control the new society and the processes at work within it. To this end, a cadre of trained, rational specialists was needed, the so-called social engineers. These experts could gain insights and knowledge from America, the most modern society of all. American sociology and social psychology were already dealing with the problems of modern society

16. Adrian Molin, *Kris: Till belysningen av svensk demokrati* (Stockholm: AB Nordiska bokhandeln, 1925), 13-15, 32-35, 38; *Stafetten går vidare: Svenska perspektiv* (Stockholm: AB Nordiska bokhandeln, 1935), 16-18, 41, 868-7, 222-23, 225, 249; Johan Benzendal, *Amerikanska brev* (Stockholm: J. A. Lindblads förlag, 1925), 13, 23, 26, 39-46, 84, 158-60, 230-31, 234-39, 245, 247-48; Sten Selander, *Europée; amerikaner och annat* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1930), 76-77, 939-6, 101, 108-09, 111-12; *Modern: Lekmannapredikningar i radio* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1932), 12-16, 57-60, 73, 105-07.

17. Arnold Ljungdal, *Kulturen i fara* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1927), 21-22; Artur Lundkvist, *Atlantvind* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1932), 9, 14, 42-43, 66, 70, 90-92, 130-32, 180-82.

and had a great deal to teach the Swedes. Thus, Americanization would in a sense become a means to regulate the future development in Sweden. Alva and Gunnar Myrdal were well-known proponents of these views.¹⁸

Concluding Remarks

Many Swedish intellectuals, technicians, and businessmen in the period 1900-1939 took an interest in the United States and the phenomena and tendencies they thought they could discern there. Their concern was with understanding the causes and effects of the American development, which they hoped would enable them to better analyze and control the Swedish development. The urge to bring about a form of controlled modernization in Sweden was a fundamental element in this interest. Modernization was an extensive and multifaceted process that was radically transforming a number of different areas of life in an unpredictable manner. Swedish intellectuals wanted not only to be able to guess the outcome of this process but also to control it. Here, Americanization, if it could be controlled, was regarded as a possible resource to use in order to achieve the wanted results. Not infrequently, Americanization was held up as an alternative to both rigid, obstinate conservatism and wild-eyed radicalism. The American spirit and methods would generate economic growth, thereby settling social and political conflict and forestalling revolution. At the same time, the problems of social and political community would be solved under more ordered conditions in Sweden than in America itself, it was hoped.

Modernization gave rise to questions concerning human nature and the ideal society. These questions were manifested in other questions of a more limited extent regarding social values, political systems, and the conditions of daily life. The answers to these questions varied. There were several ways to interpret the direction and character of the modern-

18. Jan Olof Nilsson, *Alva Myrdal – en virvel i den moderna strömmen* (Stockholm/Stehag: Symposion, 1994), 140-44, 208-11, 215-16, 239, 252-54; Gunnar Asplund et al., *acceptera* (Stockholm: Tiden, 1931), 79, 81, 83, 85-86, 101-02, 128; Alva and Gunnar Myrdal, *Kontakt med Amerika* (Stockholm: Albert Bonniers förlag, 1941), pp. 30, 33-35, 57, 90, 134-35, 138, 178-80.

ization process, and to identify it with Americanization, which in its turn could also be interpreted in more than one way, was but one. But Americanization was more often than not considered to be a process that should be adopted selectively and adapted to Swedish conditions. In that way, changes would not get out of hand but could be kept sensible and moderate.