

# TEACHING AMERICAN STUDIES IN SWEDEN:

## Navigating an Archipelagic Field

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**Abstract:** This article sets out to map the teaching of American studies in Sweden. Since American studies is not a degree-awarding discipline in Sweden, this is not a straightforward task. The first part of the essay discusses American studies as it looks at the only center of higher education in Sweden that identifies it as a subject, the Swedish Institute for North American Studies at Uppsala University. In the second part we look at the field in a broader sense, identifying courses about North America currently available at Swedish universities and surveying their subjects and topics. Together, the two parts outline the contours of a field of teaching that, we suggest, is best described as archipelagic. The article concludes with a discussion of the possibilities and challenges for American studies teaching in Sweden and offers some thoughts and suggestions for the future, arguing for increased teacher and institutional cooperation and the need to establish American studies as a degree-awarding discipline.

**Keywords:** higher education, teaching, North American studies, area studies, Sweden

Since American studies is not an established discipline in Swedish higher education, an exploration of the teaching of American studies in Sweden is not simply a matter of compiling a list of existing degrees or courses offered at American studies departments—neither of which exist in the country. In the first part of this essay, we will discuss American studies as it looks at the only center of higher education in Sweden that identifies it as a subject—the Swedish Institute for North American Studies (SINAS) at Uppsala University, which offers a minor in American studies. But to assume that this means that teaching about the United States or North America cannot be found in other places in Swedish higher education would be a mistake. Consequently, the second section of this essay sets out to map the field in a broader sense, identifying courses about North America currently available in Sweden. Together, the two parts outline the contours of a field of teaching that, we suggest, is best described as archipelagic, consisting of several small actors. We end the essay with some reflections on the possibilities and challenges for American studies teaching in Sweden and offer a few thoughts and suggestions for the future.

### **The Subject of American Studies in Sweden**

As early as 1946, undergraduate courses with a partial focus on American literature have been offered within the Faculty of Arts at Uppsala University. The main content of these courses, however, was focused on developing students' broad knowledge of English language and literature through teaching oral and written language skills, the history of the English language, and British and American literature. By the early 1970s, content on the history of and societal conditions in Great Britain and the United States was slowly incorporated into the curriculum in the form of course units or stand-alone courses at the Department of English.

One example was a course unit at the basic level (first cycle entry-level) offered in the fall term of 1974 called "British and American Society and History" as part of a survey course aimed at developing written and oral language skills in English, including Business English and broad knowledge of English and American literature.<sup>1</sup> This particular course unit surveyed non-fiction works on the political, social, economic, and cultural conditions of Great Britain and the United States.<sup>2</sup> There were similar courses offered in various forms from the early 1970s to the mid 1990s at the Department of English that aimed to broaden and/or deepen students' knowledge of American society, covering the social, political, economic, and historical conditions in the United States. These were commonly offered as one course unit within a growing number of survey courses in American literature at the department.<sup>3</sup>

In the early 1990s, discussions began about creating a large survey course in North American studies at UU, partially prompted by the establishment of the Swedish Institute of North American Studies in 1985. By the fall term of 1996, these discussions were made reality when the first survey course in North American studies at the basic level (first cycle entry-level) was offered by SINAS. The course was taught in English and consisted of four course units: Introduction to North American Society and Culture; American History; American Politics; and American and Canadian Literature in the Twentieth Century.<sup>4</sup> Because of the course's interdisciplinary character, it was jointly financed by the Languages section and the History, Philosophy and Arts section of the Faculty of Arts, as well as by the Faculty of Social Sciences.<sup>5</sup>

While SINAS initially had been a stand-alone research center at UU, it was made a section of the Department of English in 2003. At this point, the survey course, as well as other courses in American studies, were incorporated into the course

offerings at the Department of English, within the newly formed Faculty of Languages.<sup>6</sup> Today, SINAS, and UU, is the only place in Sweden for the interdisciplinary study of North America.

Currently, UU offers American studies courses at the BA and MA levels. The full term “American Studies A” (first cycle entry-level) course of 30 ECTS<sup>7</sup> is offered during fall terms and consists of four modules: “Introduction to American History,” “Introduction to American Politics,” “Race and Ethnicity in the United States,” and “American Media Cultures.” Two of these courses—on history and politics—are offered as both on-campus and online options. The full term “American Studies B” (first cycle continuation-level) course of 30 ECTS runs during spring terms and requires previous studies of 30 ECTS in the humanities or social sciences. It can, in other words, either be studied as a continuation of “American Studies A” or as a free-standing course. The B-level course—which, together with the A-level course, can become a minor field of study (“biämne”) in a BA degree—consists of the modules “Global American History,” “Current Issues in American Politics,” “Heritage and Memory in American Culture,” and “Current Research in American Studies.” At the MA level (second cycle), UU offers two 7.5 ECTS courses: the advanced survey course “Understanding the United States” and “Swedish-American Relations in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives.” SINAS has also developed a 7.5 ECTS online course together with Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois, called “Collaborating on Crisis Studies in Sweden and the United States: Problem Solving via Digital Technologies,” which since 2022 has been offered during fall terms. All of these courses were either revised or created in 2022–23.

Some observations can be made about the nature of the SINAS courses. First, the number of courses has recently grown. For many years, stu-

dents were only provided the eight modules existing within the previous versions of the A- and B-level terms. Those older courses had an emphasis on history, politics, and mass media—these three themes made up six out of eight modules. There was also a literature module in the B-level course for several years. Although attention to media is reduced in the current versions of the courses, the focus on history and politics has remained strong. To some degree, this is a holdover from previous course designs. It does, however, also reflect student demand. The modules in history and politics, and especially the introductory A-level modules, attract a steady number of students.

A third observation concerns the geographic focus of the courses. Even though SINAS is a center for “North American studies” and the courses are labeled in English as “American studies,” the official Swedish name for these courses is *USA-kunskap*, which literally translates to “knowledge about the United States.” This is indeed the more accurate description of the scope of the courses. None of the courses deal with Canada or Mexico or apply hemispheric perspectives on the study of North America. Rather, the focus is very much on historical and contemporary issues relating specifically to the United States. While this is clearly limiting, there are several explanations for this. One is institutional and historical: SINAS has always had a US focus, largely due to the academic interest of previous staff. Another reason is the expertise of its current staff, who have worked specifically on the United States and on American-Swedish relations. Lastly, there is an outside interest among media, the general public, and students in the United States, and the Department of English and SINAS staff have for many years sought to lean into this interest.

There are a few challenges related to the current course structure in American studies at UU and we want to highlight three of them. First, it has

never been possible to obtain a bachelor's, master's, or doctoral degree in American studies in Sweden. The lack of a degree option—especially at the BA level—probably makes it difficult to retain students across terms. Many students take either a full term of American studies or individual 7.5 ECTS courses as part of other degree programs, in, for example, history, law, business, or political science. The lack of a bachelor's thesis and a bachelor's degree in American studies means that there is little incentive for ambitious students to continue their studies within the subject. Since student retention is a challenge, it has been necessary to allow for students without previous knowledge in American studies to also enroll in the B-level course (and its individual 7.5 ECTS courses). While some students in, for example, "Global American Politics" will have studied the full term of "American Studies A," other students will not have any previous knowledge of US history or society. This creates a challenge of progression. In essence, it is not currently possible to ensure that students who complete the B-level course have an equal understanding of the subject at hand. Without the prospect of a degree in American studies, student retention and knowledge progression will remain a problem.<sup>8</sup>

The second challenge is one of staffing. SINAS currently consists of two permanent teaching staff members. This naturally creates a constraint since the existing expertise and research focus will affect the content of the course offerings. Finally, and related to the above, the third challenge concerns the decentralized nature of educational funding at UU. The decisions regarding which courses to offer are made by individual departments. This means that the Department of English at UU is the gatekeeper of American studies as a higher education subject in Sweden. All course offerings are subject to the head of the English department—who is responsible for the educational budget and staffing—and its department board—which decides on

curriculum and course offerings. At the moment, each 7.5 ECTS module in American studies is granted eight two-hour seminars. This makes it practically impossible to include exhaustive coverage of important themes and topics. Some issues that would be beneficial to cover more extensively include environmentalism, poverty, popular culture, and commercialism. Most significantly, Native American history and Indigenous perspectives are currently devoted rather little space in the A- and B-level courses. With more seminars per course, or with more courses offered as part of a coherent and degree-awarding package of courses, that problem could more easily be rectified.

### **North America in Swedish Higher Education**

We have chosen to do the broader mapping of the field by looking at what first and second cycle courses are available on North American culture, history, society, and politics at Swedish universities. Our discussion then examines these options, looking at where these courses are offered, at what level and with what progression, what disciplines they are in, and what topics they deal with.

In our search for courses, we took advantage of the fact that Swedish university admissions is mainly a centralized process, where applications to all courses and degree programs at both first- and second-cycle levels are submitted via the website [antagning.se](http://antagning.se). This site thus collects all available courses and has a good search function. Our search was conducted on April 16, 2024, and included courses and degree programs that were currently, or had been, advertised for the spring and fall term of 2024. The search terms used were "USA," "Amerika" ("America"), and "Nordamerika" ("North America"). We also used "Kanada" ("Canada"), but this term did not yield any hits. In addition to course or degree program names, the search engine

also uses keywords that each higher education institute submits for their courses.

Two things should be noted about this method of collecting material. First, if we had gone through all courses and degree programs on offer at Swedish HEIs ourselves, we would likely have identified a few courses that the search engine has not included. Such an approach was not practicable, however, nor do we have reason to believe that differences would have been more than marginal. Furthermore, a prospective student would be unlikely to go beyond the results of the search engine. Second, this method means that shorter modules that are part of 30-ECTS (one term) courses or degree programs with a focus on American studies content that are not offered as individual courses do not show up in our material. One important example of such modules is the components focusing on American literature and culture in degree programs for future teachers of English, as well as in English degree courses generally. Modules focusing wholly or partly on the US or North America more broadly are, in our experience, also likely to be found in disciplines such as history, media studies, and political science.

After an initial review of the search results, in which duplicates and courses that did not have a significant focus on the US or North America were removed, we were left with a collection of thirty-one individual search results. Only one of these was a degree program, a two-year master's program in English with a specialization in American literature and culture, offered by the Department of English at Uppsala University. In addition to this program, the results thus included thirty courses; thirteen of these were offered by SINAS and have been discussed above.

Of the approximately fifty institutions of higher education in Sweden, only seven appear in our material: Gothenburg University (GU), Jönköping

University (JU), Karlstad University (KAU), Linköping University (LiU), Mälardalen University (MdU), Södertörn University (SH), and Uppsala University (UU). Unsurprisingly, of these seven universities, Uppsala University stands out; in addition to the thirteen courses offered by SINAS, an additional five courses and the only degree program are found at UU. The other twelve courses are divided as follows: GU and SH offer three courses each, JU and KAU two each, and LiU and MdU one each. The dominance of Uppsala University in our material is partly explained by its being the home of SINAS, but also by the fact that its Department of English is home to the only chair in American literature in Sweden, as well as a doctoral program with a specialization in American literature. It is worth noting that many universities that are not found in our material are large or midsize institutions where research in a broadly defined American studies field is indeed conducted. The most notable absence is perhaps Stockholm University (SU), especially since there are centers for both Latin American studies and Canadian studies at SU. Moreover, it is noteworthy that Linneaus University—which has a strong profile in research and teaching on postcoloniality, indigeneity, and global history—does not offer courses tagged with any of our search terms.

Looking at the courses offered outside of SINAS from the point of view of their level and whether they are part of a progression, we find that Uppsala University's offerings likewise stand out. The master's program in English with a specialization in American literature and culture entails progression within the two-year course of study. However, the degree program builds on a bachelor's degree in English with a literature specialization, rather than requiring a bachelor in American literature (which does not exist as a degree in Sweden) or allowing an American studies degree to count towards eligibility. Nine courses of the seventeen not offered by SINAS in our material are offered at the advanced level. As with the

master's degree program at UU, the eligibility requirements for these nine courses are either a bachelor's degree or specific courses in the subject within which the course is offered. In other words, the progression is not in the form of more in-depth knowledge of the United States or North America as such. Rather, the area-specific content mainly appears to serve as case studies for processes, concepts, or ideas central to the discipline in question. The courses at first cycle level rarely have eligibility requirements other than general university eligibility, and when they do, they specify courses within the subject in question.

To find out which disciplines these courses are offered in, we have looked at the subjects that are specified for each course at the centralized university admissions portal in Sweden, [antagning.se](http://antagning.se). These are mainly the same as the main field of study, as stated in the official course documents, except for USA-kunskap (American studies)—the official field of study for the courses offered by SINAS—which are labeled “English” and “civics” (“Samhällskunskap”) or “English” and “history” (and in one case “civics” and “languages”). This discrepancy reflects the fact that American studies is not generally recognized as a discipline in Sweden. Nine of the seventeen courses in our material not offered by SINAS are specified as courses in “English,” sometimes in combination with “literary studies” (“Litteraturvetenskap”), highlighting the close connection between the subject of English and the study of American literature and culture in Sweden. All these courses are also offered with English language instruction. A tenth course, “Creative Writing for Teachers, with a Focus on the US,” is unique in its material since it has the label “English” in combination with “pedagogy” and “educational sciences,” and it is given in the official main field “curriculum studies” (“Didaktik”). The course is on the teaching of creative writing, includes a focus on creative writing in the US

context, and is aimed at Swedish school teachers. Of the remaining seven courses, three are offered in “religious studies” and “theology,” two in “history,” one in “intellectual history” (“Idé- och lärdoms historia”), and the final one is labeled “civics” (“Samhällskunskap”) and “political science” (“Statsvetenskap”). If we look at subject labels and universities in combination, we find that courses offered in the English subject can be found at four of the seven universities in our material (UU, KAU, MdU, and SH), whereas courses in religion are offered at three universities (GU, LiU, and JU), with one course each. Courses in history are offered at GU and UU, and the one course in political science is offered by JU. The dominance of English is thus also reflected in the number of universities that offer courses in the subject.

The dominance of courses in English, particularly those with a literary focus—effectively being courses in American literature—is further emphasized by the fact that the sole degree program in our material is in English with a specialization in American literature and culture, offered at the Department of English at UU. It is worth noting that the information about the master's program emphasizes that the American literature and culture specialization includes courses on “literature, theory and contemporary critical debates” that “include elements of American literature, allowing you to study this literature transnationally and comparatively.”<sup>9</sup> A transnational perspective is certainly motivated by current dominant research trends. However, nine of the eleven courses offered (not counting the final master's thesis) are identical to the ones offered by the master's program with a specialization in English literature at the same department. Student numbers and economic concerns surely play a role in such decisions, but this also reflects an academic tradition in Sweden of seeing American literature as part of English-language literature rather than as a component of area studies.

The dominance of the English subject is not unexpected; however, it is somewhat surprising that more disciplines were not represented in our material. In particular, the absence of courses in film studies and media studies is surprising, given the importance of the US in these subjects and the amount of research conducted in these areas at Swedish universities. While degree programs within these disciplines certainly include modules on the US or North America, it seems a shame that there are no courses on offer for students interested in American film or media, except for the one 7.5-credit course offered by SINAS (which, however, carries the subject label “civics,” perhaps making it harder to find for prospective students).

While we have not analyzed course syllabi, the course names and course descriptions tell us something about their foci. Courses in English with a focus on American literature (nine) are mainly at the second cycle level (six) and focus on either a genre (autobiography in two cases), a period (modernism or colonial and early republic, respectively), or the writings of a particular group (African American women writers). Of the three courses offered with a focus on American literature at first cycle level, one is an overview course while the other two focus on multi-ethnic literature and ecocriticism, respectively. Of the seven courses in disciplines other than English, only one is offered at the advanced level. An interesting contrast is that while all three courses in religious studies deal with religion and politics, the three courses in history/intellectual history have different foci: “The US in the World: From Colonial Periphery to Superpower” and “The Road to the White House: Modern US Political History” at GU and “Diversity and Democracy: The Philosophical Tradition of Cultural Pluralism in the USA” at SH. The course in political science at JU picks up two themes from the other courses but adds class: “American Politics: Race, Class, Religion.” Even across disciplines we can thus identify certain recurring

themes in questions of social identity and diversity (ethnicity, race, class, gender) and the roles of and connections between religion and politics in US society. With knowledge of ongoing research in American studies in Sweden, it is also possible to identify the research expertise of individual researchers in these courses.

### **Challenges and Possibilities**

As has become clear from the discussion above, how we understand American studies teaching in Sweden depends on several factors, including the boundaries of the subject area and the institutional nature of the research field. If American studies teaching includes the development of incremental knowledge about North America, the materials and sources adopted in teaching—the subject matter itself—become significant. This kind of teaching about the United States is done in several different disciplinary contexts in Sweden today. If American studies teaching is defined by the development of coherent and complex knowledge about North America, there are relatively few courses in Sweden that aim to do this today, most of which—unsurprisingly—are offered by SINAS, yet even there the complexity of knowledge is stymied by the challenge of enabling a clear progression. Another way of thinking about teaching in the field entails making central the understanding of key concepts and perspectives in international American studies such as race, settler colonialism, Indigeneity, slavery, imperialism, frontier, capitalism, and freedom in the context of North America. These concepts and their relevance to America are clearly grappled with in courses across several disciplines, both within and outside the American studies subject.

Alongside the teaching of key critical concepts, it has been argued that American studies is defined by its “capaciousness” and interdiscipli-

narity.<sup>10</sup> While interdisciplinarity could be a reasonable definition of what would constitute American studies teaching in Sweden, that too raises additional questions. Although several of the courses offered at SINAS are interdisciplinary in their structure and content—in terms of problems addressed, sources studied, and scholarship used—the lack of a bachelor's thesis course or a master's program with dedicated theory and methods instruction means that interdisciplinarity is not itself explicitly taught as content matter. In addition, making interdisciplinarity a defining characteristic also raises the question of which disciplines should be included. Looking at the current situation in Sweden, the study of American literature and culture is mainly located in English departments across Sweden, whereas the study of its history, politics, and media cultures is the main focus of the courses offered at SINAS. From an international perspective, where a cultural studies approach that draws heavily on literary studies is an important component of American studies, this division emphasizes that even the more interdisciplinary approaches of SINAS are shaped by its institutional context.

American studies teaching in Sweden, then, is perhaps best described as archipelagic, consisting of a number of differently sized islands that together constitute the territory. Since teaching and research are closely related, it is important to acknowledge the nature of the American studies research field in Sweden. This field involves a relatively limited number of scholars who are scattered across universities, departments, and disciplines, many of whom are engaged in the Swedish Association for American Studies (SAAS). Despite the massive interest in the United States in Sweden, the academic study of North America is limited, and American studies is not widely recognized as a research field—either within or outside academia. Scholars researching North American topics mainly influ-

ence teaching locally at their home departments, in subjects such as English, political science, or religion. They do not have institutional capacity or support to build more complex American studies training, but they have an American studies research competency that they can bring to their teaching.

The situation as we have described it has apparent problems. Even though coherent American studies education exists at UU, the prospect of fostering complex knowledge about North America is limited by the lack of a subject degree. While it is a strength that individuals at various departments and within various fields can contribute to teaching about North America in Sweden, this means that knowledge about North America is largely taught in isolated, small pieces. Thus, the archipelagic nature of American studies teaching as it currently works does not support a sustainably interdisciplinary approach. In addition, since American studies teaching is carried out by a small number of individuals and only exists as a dedicated subject at a single institution in Sweden, it is worryingly vulnerable.

The archipelagic character of American studies research and teaching in Sweden will likely remain in the foreseeable future, but we remain hopeful for some incremental but important changes that could have a significant impact. In fact, its archipelagic nature can become a strength given the right approach. First, we need to foster an awareness that American studies is a teaching subject in Sweden, grounded in a vibrant and international research field. In other words, we need to make visible and tangible the existence of the archipelago and supporting an understanding of the individual institutions not as separate islands, but as linked. Second, it would be greatly beneficial for the subject nationally if American studies becomes a degree-awarding subject at UU. Such a change would elevate the status of the subject in Sweden and



create better conditions for student retention and knowledge progression. In terms of our extended metaphor, we think of this as establishing a main island—a hub that gathers competencies and drives development but also provides support to smaller islands. This vision should not be understood as establishing a neo-colonial-style cosmopolitan center. Instead, the teaching landscape would be characterized by exchanges in multiple directions and a recognition of the interdependence of all its actors. It necessitates increasing communication and collaboration between teachers across subjects and disciplines, as well as within American studies at SINAS, to enable more sustained exchanges of ideas, knowledge, and experiences. Put differently, we need to establish regular ferry links and bridges between our islands. This is the work not only of individuals, but also of institutions.

## Notes

1. "Uppsala universitet. Engelska. Lokala studieplaner ht 1974.," F1.2: Studieplaner och litteraturlistor 1957–1976, Engelska institutionen (Ei), Uppsala University Archives (UUA).
2. "Uppsala universitet. Engelska. Lokala studieplaner ht 1974.," F1.2: Studieplaner och litteraturlistor 1957–1976, in Ei, UUA.
3. F1.1: Studieplaner och litteraturlistor 1965–1977; F1.2: Studieplaner och litteraturlistor 1957–1976; F1.3: Studieplaner och litteraturlistor 1977–1980; F1.4: Studieplaner 1981–1989; and F1.5: Studieplaner och litteraturlistor 1990–1995, in Ei, UUA.
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6. F1.7: Kurs-/Utbildnings-planer 1996–2004; and F1.11: Kurs-/Utbildnings-planer. Praktisk engelska, USA-kunskap, fackspråkliga kurser, keltiska kurser 2005–2016, in Ei, UUA.
7. ECTS stands for European Credit Transfer System. All courses at Swedish universities comprise a specified number of ECTS credits, where one-week full time study equals 1.5 credits and one term equals 30 credits. A BA degree is thus 180 ECTS credits.
8. Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development," 76–87.
9. "Master's Programme in English."
10. Sze, "Introduction: Engaging Contradictions," 341–45; Cohen and Wang, "Teaching the Introduction," 347–54.

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