

# THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LOCATION

## Practicing American History in Sweden

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**Abstract:** This article deals with the teaching of American history in Sweden. It focuses on developments at Uppsala University, where a course in American history has been taught since 1996, as a part of our American studies sequence. Placing it within the larger context of doing American studies in Sweden, it traces the development of the course discusses important topics taught and the challenges of finding suitable reading materials for students enrolled in the course.

**Keywords:** teaching, American history, curricula, textbooks, Sweden

In October 1996, the Swedish Institute for North American Studies (SINAS) at Uppsala University introduced a five-week module in American history at the undergraduate level. It was part of a semester-long course called “Basic course in North American studies,” where the other three courses included “Introduction to the societies and cultures of North America,” “American politics,” and “American and Canadian literature of the 20th Century.” I had the privilege of being a part of the planning and establishment of this course, and for over a quarter of a century I have taught the course in American history. This article provides some reflections on the experiences of teaching the course and on the challenges of doing American history in Uppsala and in Sweden.

The course in 1996 was not the first time that American history was taught at Uppsala University. It had been part of the history curriculum since the 1960s in the general survey courses of Western/world history for undergraduate students. It was, however, most likely the first separate course in American history offered at Uppsala University. The course plan that was adopted describes the course in the following way:

[t]he course gives an overview of American history from colonial times to the present day. Special emphasis is placed on aspects related to American exceptionalism and ethnicity. The goal is to give students a better understanding of contemporary American society by deepening their understanding of important events and forces that have helped shape its history.<sup>1</sup>

The short paragraph captures some of the challenges of teaching American history in Sweden. On the one hand, the great majority of Swedish undergraduate university students in an introductory course in American history come to the classroom with often fairly sketchy notions of

American history from their secondary-school training. Thus, an American history course at the introductory level needs to give an overview of American history.

Furthermore, the course took into account the significance of location—the fact that it was taught outside the United States. We included aspects that students could be assumed to have some familiarity with, or dimensions of American history that lent themselves to comparisons with other countries. In this case, ethnicity (and the experience of American immigration) was assumed to be familiar to the Swedish students, while the discussion of exceptionalism gave the students an opportunity to think of American history from a comparative and contrastive perspective.

The experiences of the first group of students were positive overall. A few quotes from the course evaluation include “incredibly good,” “I am very happy with this course,” and “I learned a great deal.” Negative comments pointed to the compressed time frame (the course was taught twice a week over a five-week period), and, as one student pointed out, “it seems impossible to cover more than two hundred years in five weeks.” No students addressed the issue of prior knowledge or preparation for American history, while a few commented positively on the special emphasis on ethnicity and exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup>

The course has continued to be taught for almost three decades. It has remained popular, with robust enrollment numbers. It also exists as an online distance course. The basic elements have remained the same—an overview with a special emphasis on topics that resonate with the domestic, Swedish context. The current course description reads:

The course gives an overview of the historical developments in that geographic area

which is today the United States. The emphasis is on the period from colonial times to the present. There is special focus on social, political, and cultural dimensions and on the role of diversity in American history.<sup>3</sup>

It can be noted that the emphasis on ethnicity has been replaced by “diversity,” and that “exceptionalism” as an explicit theme has been removed. However, the question “how different is the United States?” is still introduced and discussed during the course. As a number of international students take the course (it is one of the English-language courses available to non-Swedish speaking students at Uppsala University), the comparative element is used as both an academic and a pedagogical tool.

The phrase “that geographic area which is today the United States” should also be noted. It is a way of recognizing that the geographic configuration of the United States has changed over the years. It provides an opportunity to problematize westward expansion and manifest destiny, as students all too often are bound by what Daniel Immerwahr calls the “logo map” of the United States.<sup>4</sup> It also reflects an increasing awareness of the conflict between the Eurocentric and Indigenous view of the history of what became the United States, something which has increasingly become a topic of discussion in the American studies community in the Nordic countries.<sup>5</sup>

Of course, the development away from exceptionalism and the questioning of Eurocentrism mirrors developments in American historiography. With regard to exceptionalism, our location in Sweden lends itself to fruitful discussions with our Swedish and international students that are different than if the course had been taught in the United States. The political or ideological aspects of American exceptionalism so noticeable in American academic milieu work in different ways here. Even though we discuss the

consequences of an argument that says that the United States is not only different but also better, the geographic, cultural, and political distances between the two countries mean that contexts are less ideologically charged. The discussions take on a more distanced and academic meaning. The challenge to the Eurocentric seems to be more natural for our students. One explanation can be many years of discussion of postcolonialism in the humanities and social sciences in Sweden. Another factor is a growing awareness of Swedish colonialism and Indigeneity, both in North America and in Sweden itself.

### **Course Literature**

The significance of location is particularly noticeable when it comes to the course literature, which is a special challenge when teaching American history outside of the United States. There is a plethora of textbooks on American history. The sleek, pedagogically designed, nicely illustrated books, these days often linked to extensive online resources, are clearly produced with the large American market for undergraduate US history survey courses in mind. Although the requirements vary from state to state, and although the quality of instruction is often bemoaned, it is still safe to assume that the majority of American first-year university students have taken one or two courses in American history in high school. This means that almost all of the American textbooks are intended for students with an American education who have already taken courses in American history. The books can thus not immediately be used in a Swedish classroom. In addition, our courses are usually shorter than their often semester-long equivalents in the United States.

We have had to seek other course books. For many years we used *The Free and the Unfree* by

Peter Carroll and David Noble. Originally published in 1977, it has undergone revisions and appeared in several editions. As the title suggests, the book is structured around freedom and unfreedom in American history, a theme many of the Swedish students were familiar with. Its length also made it possible to teach in five weeks. When *The Free and the Unfree* finally went out of print, we opted for Philip Jenkins's *A History of the United States*, now in its fifth edition. The book is a highly readable survey of American history, pointing to several important lines of development in American history.

In recent years, we have added Jill Lepore's *This America: The Case for the Nation* (2019), which explicitly deals with American nationhood and the question of who has been included or excluded in the American nation. She wrote it while working on *These Truths*—a massive one-volume history of the United States—partly to reflect on the nature of writing a national history.<sup>6</sup> Students have responded well to Lepore. The book is analytical and thesis driven, and complements Jenkins's textbook, which is more of a traditional textbook survey. It gives us a good opportunity to raise theoretical and methodological aspects of nationality and the issues of selection involved in writing a national history. It helps the students understand the contentious nature of history, both American and of other countries. We read Lepore at the end of the course, and it works very well as a conclusion to the course.

There are also shorter pieces in the course, such as an article by Ta-Nehisi Coates and excerpts from Ronald Takaki's *A Different Mirror*. The internet also provides excellent online resources that resonate with today's technologically oriented students. We ask them to watch and consider lectures by American historians Daniel Immerwahr, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and Gordon Wood, to listen to an episode from the public radio show *BackStory* with Ed Ayers, Brian Balogh,

and Peter Onuf, and to watch Barack Obama's speech in Selma, Alabama, from 2015.

### The Larger Context

Our history course is also related to the wider position of American studies in Sweden. The country has had close cultural and social relations with the United States for two centuries, partly due to the long migration history between the two countries since the early nineteenth century, and to a common sense of modernity since the early twentieth century.<sup>7</sup> Still, the academic fields of American studies and American history have been weakly developed. In two overviews from 1958 and 1985, respectively, Norwegian Americanist Sigmund Skard and Swedish historian Harald Runblom point to the paucity of Swedish academic work on American history and note the unwillingness of Swedish historians to go beyond their country for topics.<sup>8</sup> In a recent discussion, furthermore, Adam Hjorthén has noted the contrast between the very strong general interest in the United States in Sweden and the weakly developed Swedish academic interest, calling it a "Swedish-American paradox."<sup>9</sup> It is a paradox that also influences the teaching of American history in Sweden.

A large research project on trans-Atlantic migration in Uppsala during the 1960s and 1970s is a major exception. Scores of dissertations, books, and articles were written, in which the United States played an important role.<sup>10</sup> Still, most of the emphasis remained on the Swedish side of the migration, and few studies focused on the United States proper.<sup>11</sup> As a part of the cultural Cold War, there was also an American interest in US governmental and non-governmental organizations to promote American studies and American studies in Sweden. Plans existed to create a special chair in American history at Uppsala University, which would have been the only one in the country, building on the migration project

and with support from, for example, the American Council of Learned Societies.

A separate library for American history was established and a Swedish language textbook on American history—*Förenta Staternas Historia* by Håkan Berggren—was published in 1966 in anticipation of such a decision. Eventually, however, the University opted for a separate professorship in American literature in the Department of English, where this field of study had been growing since the early 1950s, with significant support from the Rockefeller Foundation. The decision not to establish a chair in American history meant that Swedish historians did not take the step from Swedish-American history to “regular” American history. The strong interest in trans-Atlantic migration and in mobility was instead channeled into social and geographical mobility studies dealing with Sweden itself. In addition, demography became emphasized, and eventually a special chair in demographic history—instead of American history—was established, at Umeå University.

How different is Sweden from other countries in its approach to American history? Answering that question requires yet-to-be-made systematic comparisons, but the contributions to *Historians Across Borders* from 2014<sup>12</sup> suggest that the situation for American history is better in, for example, the UK, Germany, and France. In 1985, Magnus Mörner, one of the few Swedish historians who made his entire career on non-Swedish topics, suggested that a country’s size could be one factor that explains the degree to which its national historiographies pay attention to other countries. Although he saw the strong national paradigm among his Swedish colleagues, he noted that they did not deviate significantly in their interest patterns from historians of “other smaller countries in Europe” in this respect.<sup>13</sup>

Mörner’s observations are corroborated by a bibliographic analysis of the subject matters of

Swedish doctoral dissertations in history from 1976 to 2005. It concluded that of the 600 dissertations presented during the period, almost three-fourths dealt with Sweden, and that the share focusing on national Swedish topics increased during the period.<sup>14</sup> The author comments that the disinterest in “international history” among Swedish historians seems “remarkable” given the growing fields of global and international history in recent decades.<sup>15</sup> Similar observations were made in 2003, when another Swedish historian noted that the “national paradigm” remained strong in the country. The 2003 report specifically lists the geographic focuses of all dissertations from 1997 to 2001. Close to 80 percent dealt with Swedish conditions. The US was the focus of 1 percent.<sup>16</sup>

### **Conclusion: Does Location Matter Among Swedish Historians of the US?**

The teaching of American history must take location into account. Swedish students lack the educational and cultural contexts that most American students in an introductory course in American history have. This affects the textbooks that can be used, and also influences which aspects of American history can receive special attention. We have also seen that comparative discussions become important. Susanna Delfino and Marcus Gräser have noted that since late colonial times, Europeans have looked at North America with “an instinctively comparative eye.”<sup>17</sup> This has been true in the way our teaching of American history has been structured, and when a second course in American history was added on the intermediate level in the 2010s, it focused on global aspects of American history.

The significance of location is also clear in terms of topics for research in American history. The dominant set of questions that Swedish histori-

ans have studied have dealt with Swedish-American relations broadly conceived, with trans-Atlantic migration occupying a prominent position. It is also worth repeating that for a long time the migration was studied from a Swedish vantage point, and it is telling that strong American interests in questions of assimilation, identity, and ethnicity did not enter Swedish historiography until the 1990s. Location has also been important for several Swedish historians who have made contributions to American history in other areas, such as Native American history, early American history, and American ethnic history, in that they have had significant experiences outside Sweden, including time spent pursuing academic degrees.<sup>18</sup>

As internationalization of higher education continues to increase, and as the strong American orientation of young persons in Sweden remains strong, it may be that the significance of location will diminish. English is rapidly becoming a *lingua franca*, even in the humanities in Uppsala. Some fear that the Swedish language is in jeopardy as an academic language, whereas others claim (or hope) that the challenges to the national paradigm in Swedish historiography will increase, and that scholars will look beyond Sweden even more for their inquiries. The degree to which this benefits the study of American history in Sweden is unclear. Ultimately, however, we know from the many studies of American influences in and on the world that these processes are rarely unilinear. Local contexts and locations will thus most likely continue to matter.

## Notes

1. "Baskurs i Nordamerikastudier."
2. "Baskurs i Nordamerikastudier."
3. <https://www.uu.se/utbildning/kurs?query=5EN742>.
4. Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire*. It should be noted that *How to Hide an Empire* is used in course in "Global American History," offered in the American studies sequence on the intermediate level at SINAS.
5. Fur, "The US of America," 1–2.
6. Lepore, *These Truths*.
7. Blanck, "Migration and Modernity."
8. Runblom, "United States History," 390.
9. Hjorthén, "Curriculum Development."
10. Runblom and Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America*.
11. Blanck, "Five Decades."
12. Barreyre et al., eds., *Historians Across Borders*.
13. Mörner, "De svenska historikerna," 441.
14. Amirell, *Svenska doktorsavhandlingar*, 22.
15. Amirell, *Svenska doktorsavhandlingar*, 21.
16. Aronsson, "Bilaga," 189–94.
17. Delfino and Gräser, "Writing American History," 97.
18. Blanck, *The Creation*; Edling, *A Revolution*; Fur, *A Nation of Women*.

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