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Tobias Hübinette and Catrin Lundström

Swedish whiteness under siege

After the election in Sweden in September 2010, the racist party the Sweden Democrats (Sverigedemokraterna) has entered the national parliament with almost 6 percent of the electorate, close to 350,000 votes and 20 MPsⁱ. Both the post-election debates and most academic analyses tend to explain this new presence of the Sweden Democrats in the Swedish parliament as a reflection of a deepening feeling of dissatisfaction among certain voter segments. At the same time, a reaction that can almost be likened to an explosive eruption of antiracism has taken place within the establishment, in the media and, above all, on the Internet through various social media sites like Facebook and Twitter, and several demonstrations have also taken place. The biggest Swedish tabloid newspaper, *Aftonbladet*, which, incidentally, invited Jimmie Åkesson, the party leader of the Sweden Democrats, to write a debate article during the election campaign, has also initiated the national campaign “*Vi gillar olika*” (“We like different”) to promote itself as the country’s leading antiracist voice.

What seems to be at stake is a desire to explain the rise of the party as a result of “dissident” male working-class voters and anger that Sweden is no longer a country without a racist party in parliament. This antiracist anger and the various antiracist campaigns can be connected to Sara Ahmed’s (2006: 121) analysis of white antiracism, which “allows people to relax and feel less threatened, as if we have already ‘solved it’ and there is nothing else to do”. Until now, such a critical race and whiteness studies analysis has not been heard of in Sweden; however, we believe that it is absolutely necessary to apply such a perspective to be able to fully understand what is happening in today’s Sweden. In this article, we offer an analysis of how whiteness and white privileges can be maintained despite progressive social policies, democratization projects, gender equality and official antiracism and multiculturalism. We hope this will give a more nuanced and locally specific understanding of whiteness “as a form of power [that] is defined, deployed, performed, policed and reinvented through a multiplicity of practices”, in Sweden hitherto visible only through its structural invisibility (Twine & Gallagher 2008).

In this position paper, we argue that Sweden is at the moment subjected to what we have chosen to

call the double-binding power of Swedish whiteness, whereby “the old Sweden”, that is Sweden as a homogeneous society, and “the good Sweden”, that is Sweden as an antiracist and feminist country, two images of Sweden which on the surface and at a first glance may sound inconceivable but which are both perceived to be threatened and even under siege by the recent influx and contemporary presence of non-white and non-Western migrants. Through this double-binding force, which bears the promise of a destructive development to say the least, the Sweden Democrats’ and the racists’ mourning of the loss of “old Sweden” and the antiracists’ and feminists’ fear of the passing of “good Sweden” appear to have much more in common than one would expect, as these two images of Sweden are dependent upon each other, and in the end it is Swedish whiteness itself which is felt to be under attack by both the “reactionary” and the “progressive” camps.

We both situate and self-identify ourselves as postcolonial feminists and as antiracists and anti-Fascists, and we both belong to the handful of names within the Swedish academic community who explicitly categorize themselves within the field of critical race and whiteness studies, in opposition to the dominant colour blindness within Swedish humanities and social science in general. We also have in common that we both relate to and are active within area studies and so-called “Third World” research as well as so-called IMER research, that is Swedish ethnic and migration studies, as one of us has a background in Asian studies and one of us is engaging with Latin American studies and we are both doing research on people of Asian and Latin American origin living permanently in the West. At the same time, we both belong to the group of scholars who consciously try to bridge area studies and migration studies together, with the aim of decolonizing and transnationalizing this territorialized division of labour whereby one discipline conducts research on the Others as natives in the former colonies and the other conducts research on the Others as migrants in the West. In other words, our academic perspectives, political agendas and psychic investments are embedded within an antiracist and feminist background, while at the same time we are highly critical towards a hegemonic white antiracism and white feminism, which in the end risks reproducing Swedish whiteness itself.

The foundations of Swedish whiteness

In contemporary Sweden, the idea of being white without doubt constitutes the central core and the master signifier of Swedishness and thus of being Swedish, meaning that a Swede is a white person and a non-white person is not a Swede. This is evident at the time of writing, for example, when the media and the police are reporting the recent series of shootings of non-white Swedes in the Swedish city of Malmö, which might well be racially motivated, and talk about the victims as

“immigrants” and “foreigners” even though the majority were born or grew up and have lived most of their lives in Sweden and should be considered as Swedes. In other words, the difference between the bodily concept of race and the cultural concept of ethnicity has collapsed completely within the Swedish national imaginary such that whiteness is Swedishness and Swedishness is whiteness. This conflation of race and ethnicity and equivalence of Swedishness and whiteness is something that not only non-white migrants and their descendants are encountering but also adopted and mixed Swedes of colour with a background from South America, Africa and Asia who, in spite of being more or less fully embedded within Swedishness on an ethnic, linguistic and cultural level are experiencing racializing practices caused by their “non-Swedish” bodies (Hübinette & Tigervall 2010; Lundström 2010; Sawyer 2002).

The historical background to this construction of the Swedish nation must be traced back to the privileged position of Swedes in relation to the historical construction of the white race as being the elite of *homo sapiens* itself, a scientific discourse that was hegemonic for almost 200 years and is still evident in its popularized idea of Swedes as being the most beautiful and physically and aesthetically perfect people on earth (Hagerman 2006; Schough 2008). Because of this image of Sweden and the Swedes and this Swedish self-image, the country’s academic world and its scholars excelled in and contributed substantially to race science as well as to so-called area studies, namely knowledge production concerning Europe’s overseas colonies. For example, Carl Linnaeus created the first modern scientific system for race classification in the mid-1700s, Anders Retzius invented the skull or cephalic index in the 1850s, which became the principal method employed by race science itself, and the Swedish government founded the Swedish Institute for Race Biology in 1922 (Broberg 1995). The Swedish state also installed one of the most effective sterilization programs in the world as a eugenicist and race hygiene project which affected more than 60,000 Swedes before the program was dissolved in the mid-1970s, and which was racialized, heteronormative, gendered and classed (Tydén 2000). Furthermore, when it comes to encountering and relating to the world outside Europe, Swedish people have also inherited and harbour the general Western colonial and racist fantasies and images of the non-Western world and its various populations, and Sweden also shares the same pan-European legacy of anti-Semitism, antiziganism and Islamophobia (Keskinen, Tuori, Irni & Mulinari 2009). However from the 1960s and 1970s onwards, Sweden arguably became the leading internationally recognized (Western) voice and (white) supporter of decolonization and anti-colonial, anti-segregation and anti-apartheid movements and the world’s most radical proponent of social justice and gender equality, constructing itself as a colour-blind country and thereby transforming racism into a non-Swedish issue. This highly successful left-

liberal national branding promoted “good Sweden” as being the most tolerant and liberal of all (Western) countries and (white) people in the world. Amongst other things, this has resulted in the fact that, proportionally, Swedes have adopted the most children of colour from the former colonies in the world and also that Swedes have entered into interracial marriages and relationships in far higher numbers than other Western countries as Sweden portrayed itself as a non-racist and post-racial utopia with no colonial past. It is this hubris-like image of “good Sweden” that is now falling apart on both a national and an international level.

Recently, Swedish whiteness has also developed in relation to Sweden as an immigration country. Even though there is a lingering international image that the country is still ethno-racially relatively homogenous compared to other Western countries, presently almost 25 percent or 2.3 million inhabitants have some kind of foreign background, including immigrants and their children, and adopted and mixed Swedes. However, it is mainly the 8 percent or 700,000 of the total population of Sweden who have their origins in a non-European and postcolonial so-called Third World country in Asia, Africa or South America, who, in everyday life as well as in the public sphere and political discourse, are categorized as “immigrants”, “foreigners” and “non-Swedes” and oftentimes also marked as non-Christian or at least as non-Lutheran. While Sweden has always been an immigration country, immigrants from non-Western countries started to arrive in Sweden in small numbers from the 1950s but the majority began to arrive during the second half of the 1970s and particularly in the 1980s and onwards when refugee immigration took over from labour immigration. This is, of course and not coincidentally, also the time when integration started to be described as a “failed” project. Non-white and non-Christian immigrants have dominated immigration to Sweden since the end of the 1990s.

Finally, when it comes to discrimination against migrants and their descendants, and particularly against the various non-white and non-European groups, Sweden again does not differ substantially from any other Western country of today. Even non-white adoptees born in foreign countries and mixed-race Swedes born in Sweden, who in both cases usually belong to the middle and upper classes of Swedish society, have been found to have problems in establishing themselves on the labour market. Especially when it comes to residential segregation, Sweden stands out among other Western countries as having perhaps the most extreme pattern of racial segregation. It is in light of this historical and demographic history that Swedish whiteness has evolved, together with the image of Sweden that developed during the course of the Cold War and at the time of decolonization and the social revolution of 1968, namely the idea that Sweden is a paradise on earth and an

accomplished utopia for human rights, democracy, gender equality and antiracism, and where race as a concept and as a category has accordingly been made completely irrelevant and obsolete.

The expanding boundaries of whiteness

With these foundations of Swedish whiteness as a background, we therefore argue that whiteness is a pivotal analytical category in understanding the role of “the notion of the nation” and its intersection with ideologies of gender equality and class hierarchies in the recent Swedish election. According to our understanding of whiteness, Swedish whiteness includes anti-racists as well as Sweden Democrats, whites as well as non-whites, and in the end all Swedes regardless of political views or bodily phenotypes. This double-edged Swedish whiteness is similar to the hegemonic whiteness that Matthew Hughey (2010) talks about in his interviews with white antiracists and white racists in the US, where he finds that beyond the ideological statements there are many similarities between the groups in terms of white perspectives and privileges. Complicity when it comes to the construction and upholding of Swedish whiteness is in the end apparent on all sides, such as migrants who have believed in and fed the image of Sweden as the most progressive and anti-racist country in the world (whether it was true or not does not matter, it is the boasting of this megalomaniac image that counts according to this critical whiteness studies analysis), as well as all the numerous non-Swedes who have desired and are looking for (white) Swedes as partners and friends just because they are (white) Swedes (and thereby the most beautiful and genetically valuable people according to the logic of the Nordic race myth) and so on – in other words, solidarity and anti-racism has gone hand in hand with white supremacy and white homogeneity. As George Lipsitz (1998: 2) formulates it, the “possessive investment in whiteness is not a simple matter of black and white; all racialized minority groups have suffered from it, albeit to different degrees and in different ways”. It is these two images of Sweden as a homogenous and white society which the Sweden Democrats are mourning the loss of, and which in their melancholic state make them feel hate towards migrants, and the passing of Sweden as a solidarian and progressive society which white antiracists are anxious to keep alive and which has provoked such a strong reaction after the election, that in the end can be conceptualized and interpreted as a threat to Swedish whiteness itself.

Central to our analysis is also an understanding of whiteness as a socially constructed category that constantly recruits new members (Warren & Twine 1997). Boundaries of whiteness have always been reconstructed to include new groups – it is, so to speak, crucial for its survival. In the US, Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans are the most common examples of this re-formation of

whiteness, and critical race studies scholars like Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2003) argue that presently the US racial taxonomy and hierarchy are becoming more and more diversified and that the break-up of the white and black divide has resulted in new possibilities for groups such as white Latin Americans, light-skinned mixed race Americans and some East Asian groups to be able to claim whiteness. During this process, different classes and ethnicities may join around a common destiny, a process that opens up the possibility for previous Others to be part of the powerful concept and category of whiteness. As Jonathan Warren and France Winddance Twine (1997) notice in their analysis of the white category in the US, some groups, preferably those who are able to conform to “white standards” of dressing, speaking, and of cultural behaviour, may be included inside the ever-changing boundaries of whiteness. However, for those who are continuously defined as non-whites, these expanding boundaries have opposite implications since they will remain as “the defining other” (Warren & Twine 1997: 215). The implication of this analysis is that whites as well as some former non-whites can reposition themselves as whites, by distinguishing themselves from non-whites, and by adapting to the social and cultural construction of whiteness.

In the recent Swedish election, both class and ethnic boundaries were blurred by the boundaries of whiteness, which complicates former analyses about class solidarity in which the working class and the middle class can come together around the idea of redistribution through the welfare state as something that benefits both groups. Instead, in this election we saw that white people from diverse class and cultural backgrounds could join together around the notion of white superiority, regardless of being of native or foreign origin, through what can be called “the wages of whiteness”. We argue that David Roediger’s book *The wages of whiteness* from 1991 is relevant to shedding light on contemporary class and race inequalities in today’s Sweden, although it deals with the US American context. The concept of “the wages of whiteness” stems from W.E.B. Du Bois’ argument that centres around “the white problem” through the acting of the white working-class. Roediger formulates his position as follows: “Du Bois regards the decision of workers to define themselves by their whiteness as understandable in terms of short-term advantages. In some times and places, [Du Bois] argues, such advantages showed up in pay packets, where the wages of white, native-born skilled workers were high, both compared with those of Blacks and by world standards.” Vital for the white workers Du Bois studied was “that even when they received a low wage [they were] compensated in part by a ... public and psychological wage” (p. 12). Instead of using a common strategy together with black workers and other non-white workers, white workers united around the ideology of white supremacy, which undermined the idea of class unity as well as “the very *vision* of many white workers” (Roediger 1998: 13). In post-slavery US, the identity of whiteness was

taking shape around freedom, a powerful vision of masculinity and non-slavery and values that became the common identity for workers (a concept which in itself often presumes whiteness and masculinity). This identity, according to Roediger, has “its roots both in domination and in a desire to avoid confronting one’s own miseries” (p. 186). As Ruth Frankenberg (1993) observes, “whiteness as a site of privilege is not absolute but rather crosscut by a range of other axes of relative advantage and subordination; these do not erase or render irrelevant race privilege, but rather inflect or modify it” (p. 76).

Despite the vast differences between post-slavery US and contemporary post-welfare state Sweden, this analysis teaches us that race and racism are not just an *effect* of class inequalities and something that would necessarily disappear in a classless society. Moreover, it provides a tool for understanding the class-crossing practices found among the Sweden Democrats’ (and other parties’) voters. Such cross-class patterns also need to be viewed in the context of a contemporary understanding of economic politics, which is no longer just governed by class positions. In the words of George Lipsitz (1998), “even seemingly race-neutral policies [...] have increased the absolute value of being white [...] by decreasing the value of wage income and increasing the value of investment income – a move harmful to minorities, who suffer from a gap between their total wealth and that of whites even greater than the disparity between their income and white income” (p. 16). “Even in Sweden” as Allen Pred formulated it in 2000, *economic politics* are also *racial politics*. Roediger’s argument also gives us a tool for understanding the strong force of white privilege, which, in this context, is the experience of *not* having to be discriminated against, and of having a naturalized identity of national belonging (among other things). And since the boundaries of such “white wages” are socially constructed, many Sweden Democrats are migrants or descendants of migrants coming from white, Western and Christian countries, just as Irish-Americans and Italian-Americans were once allowed to become a part of the racial formation of whiteness in the US.

Swedish gender equality and whiteness

A central aspect of the construction of “good Sweden” is the generous welfare state and the achievements in gender equality policies and practices. Because of these, Sweden, along with other Scandinavian countries, has been regarded as exceptionally “woman-friendly” or “gender-equality-friendly” and has, for several years, been ranked as one of the most gender-equal societies in an international comparison. This is an ideal that has also been exported to other (Third World) countries through international development aid. However, Sweden’s gender equality politics has

been criticized for leaving little space for conflictual themes related to violence or racism (Pringle 2010). In this sense, the state-sanctioned and institutionalized gender equality discourse carries with it a sense of national identity which is intimately intertwined with whiteness and racial hierarchies and which excludes migrants as Others in relation to the very notion of gender equality (Keskinen, Tuori, Irni & Mulinari 2009; de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005).

In order to maintain the perceived unique Swedish construction of gender equality, non-whites tend to be depicted as “non-gender equal”, in conjunction with an Islamophobic discourse of the “Others’ oppression”. For Swedish white gender equality to be able to exist, someone or some-*body* is expected not to be Swedish, gender equal and white (c.f. Ahmed 2004). Gender equality in its idyllic shape is represented by the white heterosexual family, which not only depicts the Others as patriarchal but furthermore seems to justify any relegation of Others, in the private sphere primarily by the cheap labour of migrant women. Using Patricia Hill Collins’ (1998, p. 65) analysis of the ideal family as a primary site for understanding race, gender, class and nation, we argue that both “White men and White women enjoy shared racial privileges provided by Whiteness”. Following Collins’ analysis, the white family model is a site where notions of first- and second-class citizenship, territory, “home”, blood-ties, race, and nation are naturalized. In the US, just as in Sweden, the family ideal has historically been upheld by sterilization, segregation, a racialized nationalism and anti-immigration policies. This implies that feminists should remain sceptical towards the Swedish ideal associated with the construction of the gender-equal family, as it builds upon and reproduces the (social, discursive, geographical) place of the “Other”, often acted out as racial integration through subordinating practices.

Interestingly, a conservative family trend is nowadays also being found in the new housewife ideal, or at least the imperative of such, in Sweden – concurrent with the Sweden Democrats’ ideas but going back to a 1950s ideal, and represented by middle-class white women who have decided to stay at home baking and taking care of their children instead of choosing a career. Here lies a deep difference between the construction of white women standing outside the labour market on the one hand and non-white women on the other. While the white woman is expected to reproduce the nation through her household and reproductive labour, the non-white woman is subject to discourses of being welfare abusers. Such a racialized juxtaposition reflects the ideological function that the family plays in the construction of the nation as naturalizing gendered and national boundaries, and indeed how the politics of family values nurture nationalistic ideals and in the end the (re)production of Swedish whiteness.

Yet, the goals achieved through feminist politics of gender equality seemingly constituted an important aspect of the Sweden Democrats' success, where (the longing for) white masculinity is being re-installed, as both the father of the nation (the law of the white Swedish Father to speak with Lacan) and the head of the family. The image of a re-installed white masculinity was overtly used in the election campaign as the former leader of the Social Democratic Party, Mona Sahlin, was called "Mona Moslem" and pictured wearing a veil in the Sweden Democrat's visual election propaganda. In the aftermath of the election we can also conclude that gender-equal Sweden was obviously not ready for a female prime minister in contrast to, for example, India, Chile, Germany, Finland, Iceland, Pakistan, Norway and Brazil.

White mourning and melancholia

In this position paper, we have discussed some of the contemporary, but not necessarily new, aspects of whiteness, nationhood and normativity related to today's Sweden. Our aim has been to stimulate a post-election debate that includes and takes into account the normalized and naturalized hierarchies surrounding Swedishness and the double-binding power of Swedish whiteness through the mourning of the loss of "old Sweden" and the passing of "good Sweden", and which we hope will initiate a broader debate beyond the self-righteous simplification of the Sweden Democrats and the party's voters and sympathizers as being the only racists in Sweden. This hypothesis may explain the almost hysterical post-election anger among the "progressives" due to the "reactionaries'" electoral success, who, during the election campaign, rallied under the slogan "*Ge oss Sverige tillbaka*" ("Give us Sweden back"), a slogan that we argue both sides can identify with. Our critical race and whiteness studies analysis may also explain why the antiracist movement in Sweden is so heavily dominated by white Swedes, in contrast to the situation in North America where the antiracist movement is mainly composed of representatives from the minorities themselves, as well as why white Swedish feminists identifying with what other scholars have called hegemonic feminism can sometimes ally themselves with xenophobic ideologies (de los Reyes & Mulinari 2005; Liinason 2010).

The Sweden Democrats' longing for "old Sweden" is expressed as a wish to return to the time when there were no ethno-racial conflicts and no non-Western "patriarchal excesses", while what is under threat for the white antiracists is the image of Sweden as an antiracist country and for the white feminists the image of Sweden as a feminist country. In the end, all these self-images risk feeling threatened by the presence of non-white, non-Christian and non-Western migrants. It is this double-

binding force of both having been at the top of the world as the most progressive and left-liberal country and of having perceived itself to be the most racially homogenous and pure population of all white ethnicities which makes it almost impossible to deconstruct Swedish whiteness and in the end to attack and annihilate it and transform Swedishness into something else within which people of colour will also be accepted and treated as Swedes. When the object of love is threatened, under siege or even in danger of being lost forever, meaning both anti-racist and feminist Sweden and white and homogenous Sweden at the very same time, there is nothing left but regression and this unspeakable melancholia filled with limitless pain. Another problem with the mourning of “the lost Sweden” is that it excludes groups who did not live here at that perceived time period, or who do not have biological ties to the “founders” of this white Swedish solidarity. Thus, directly and indirectly, the image of the left-liberal, antiracist and solidaristic Sweden is constructed around a sense of a white homogenous past when diversity was not yet present.

In other words, the recent election took place at a time when Sweden is wracked by white melancholia and nostalgia for no longer being the whitest of all white countries in the world, and by white regression and aggression for not being in full control anymore, and therefore yearning to return to the safe days of white homogeneity when it was easier to be either a racist or an antiracist. The dream of a white homogenous past, constructed around the welfare state, which is now falling apart through a vague idea of “cultural difference”, and a longing for a homogenous future when mixed positions and hybridity have been erased, constitutes the common undisputed character for this white melancholia. This specifically Swedish white melancholia, which is so efficient in producing hate, and which is so painful to bear but yet unspeakable, goes beyond the bodies themselves. It is something of a psychic state of the nation and a structure of feeling connected to the self-image of Sweden among Swedes as well as the image of Sweden in the world, and it is thus as much about the humiliating loss of Sweden as the most progressive, humanitarian and antiracist country in the world as about the mourning of the passing of the Swedish population as being the most homogenous and whitest of all white peoples.

The other side of this analysis is, of course, that the boundaries surrounding whiteness may shift towards anyone’s disadvantage. As Roediger (1998) reminds us, whiteness is therefore “among much else, a bad idea” (p. 186). In the future, to begin with, it is our conviction that it is absolutely necessary to disentangle Swedishness and whiteness in order to be able to deconstruct and annihilate a Swedishness which does not allow non-white Swedes to be Swedish and which traps white Swedes in a melancholic state through the double-edged images of “old Sweden” and “good

Sweden”. Such critical perspectives and the introduction of critical race and whiteness studies into a Swedish context are also, as we see it, currently on the verge of being incorporated into the analyses of above all feminist and queer scholars and activists (coming from several disciplines), while this is unfortunately not the case at all when it comes to IMER research and area studies. Our hope for the future as antiracists and as feminists is therefore that a transformative moment will occur that will allow the mourning of the passing of “old Sweden” and “good Sweden” to project itself towards a more constructive understanding of the future of Swedishness. However, in order to accomplish and reach this moment of transformation it is absolutely necessary to acknowledge the fact that the object of love is irretrievably and irrevocably lost, however painful that may be to take in and accept.

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i The Sweden Democrats derive directly from the Swedish National Socialist and Fascist movement, although it has on the surface transformed itself to a right-wing populist party (Ekman & Poohl 2010). This undisputable historical fact makes the party different from the populist parties in, for example, Denmark, Norway and Finland and, arguably, also more dangerous.