Swedish Multicultural Society

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Alexandra Alund

Alexandra Alund here analyses the complex processes of transformation that have taken place in Sweden in the 1990s, which have caused uproar in a society once widely admired for its humane policies towards its overseas-born citizens.

The creolisation of world culture is reflected in its global cities, where variations are created which inspire visions of new possibilities. Thus, boundary-crossing and cultural fusion characterise Sweden, as they do other multicultural European societies. The relationship between social subordination, cultural resistance and the emergence of new cultural expressions and solidarities is a recurrent theme. And in Sweden’s suburban communities, which are ethnically diverse as well as politically charged, you can expect to encounter a wide range of cultural developments with political undertones, expressed in text, tone and image. For instance, reggae and hip-hop exhort the listener to affirm solidarity, pride and self-respect; they also encourage demands for the realisation of equality, not surprisingly, since the development of youth culture in the multietnic city is closely related to experiences of social exclusion.

Sweden is considered to be a multicultural society. However, today Swedish society is undergoing a division along ethnic lines. Social inequalities tend now to be understood in terms of cultural differences. Culture is then connected to ethnicity and race, and understood as something pure, an essence, related to some original and eternal ethnic core. This has meant that some important aspects of cultural dynamics in a multicultural society, such as cultural crossings...
and composite identities, are largely left unobserved. Within the framework of a multicultural society, new cultures, identities and ethnicities have been created. Departing from the problems of cultural essentialism which have been inherent in Swedish multiculturalism, we may draw the general features of the dominant discourse on ethnicity, its historical roots and relations to culture.

The concept of ethnicity, which has recently begun to loom large in the Swedish context, carries a lingering vagueness. It generally refers to group formation, and the drawing of both social and cultural boundaries between 'us' and 'them'. The old Greek word etnikos - which in ancient times meant heathen or savage, and denoted cultural outsiders - has, remarkably, retained much of its original meaning. References to the Others, the outsiders, those belonging to 'non-mainstream' cultures, or reckoned religiously as heathen, have been handed down over the ages, to the extent that the term includes the situation of the modern stranger in a multicultural society.

This static definition of ethnicity has notwithstanding far-reaching criticisms of its limitations and consequences - become widespread in both everyday and institutional settings in Europe. This is no less true in multicultural Sweden, where public debate is marked - and hampered - by a static view of ethnicity. Reduced to something eternal, ethnicity is often associated, in particular in the Swedish mass media, with tradition-bound and foreign immigrant cultures. Hence immigrants are considered deviant, and they are subjected to segregation and discrimination in almost every social sphere: including housing and work, child care and education, social services and health care. The focus on 'cultural' and 'ethnic' differences creates ethnically defined groups and distinct social positions. The collective appropriation builds on and promotes a hierarchical dichotomy between 'ethnic' and 'Swedish', traditional and modern. The concept of integration is associated with development, or modernisation. Cultural diversity is related in an ethnocentric manner to a superior 'Swedish culture', thus implying a 'natural order'.

The terms 'blackhead', 'foreigner' and 'immigrant' - with their attendant exclusion and cultural degradation - are related to the symbolic hierarchies retained in Swedish society. Discrimination in the labour market has made

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1. For a discussion on the Swedish term 'invandare' (translated as immigrant in this article), see note 1, p98.
Swedish people aware of the divisions within their society. There is no shared concept of what it is to be a 'citizen; some are more equal than others. This represents the contemporary state and climate of multiculturalism in Sweden. Cultural encounters are stereotyped as conflicts between the civilised and the modern, and the primitive and traditional. The cultivation and polarisation of cultural differences adds fuel to the increasingly common political discussion about the levels of overall immigration into Sweden - both labour immigrants and refugees. Herein lies the basis for distinguishing between people, with selection based on purely cultural terms. In the long run this debate will be translated to the continental stage and serve to legitimise the idea of a 'Fortress Europe'.

The practice of multiculturalism in Sweden contains, and entails, a series of paradoxes that are associated with what has become known as 'structural pluralism'. This refers to a pattern of social inequality that tends to be explained in terms of culture and diversity, specifically where there is discrimination in the labour market that appears to provide evidence of an 'ethnic division of labour'. It is well known that immigrants with Swedish degrees have lower incomes than Swedes with similar qualifications. In the 1980s, qualified immigrants who had lived in Sweden since the 1960s often found themselves in jobs beneath their qualifications. Numerous studies have indicated that the children of labour immigrants are similarly disadvantaged in terms of their earning potential, and that this group suffers higher levels of unemployment than their Swedish counterparts. The 1990s have seen a drastic fall in the percentage of immigrants with jobs. Similar changes have occurred in relative income levels. Unemployment among immigrant youth is higher than among Swedish youth. Moreover it is substantially higher among children of refugee immigrants than among the children of labour immigrants. Hence, there is reason to view the trends of the Swedish labour market with alarm.

That a 'structural' rather than a 'cultural' pluralism has become popular in Sweden is indicative of the way in which migrants are viewed. While structural pluralism stands for the actual inequality of a vertically ordered 'ethnic mosaic', the latter term seems to have acquired a largely abstract meaning. Discrimination, in the labour market for instance, is made sense of through seeing ethnic groups as belonging to static and specifically ethnocultural categories, while cultural 'difference' accounts for the failure
The social dimension of ethnicity - its relation to class and status divisions, and to social segmentation and hierarchy - is obscured in talking of 'cultural difference'. In the multitude of cultural differences and clashes, culture is employed as a smokescreen to mask social divisions; inequality and segregation prevail. This cultural reductionism also helps to conceal underlying strains in the social construction of ethnicity and to reinforce a hierarchical status system. A complex and dynamic perspective on ethnicity, therefore, is necessary if the often-fundamental social conflicts associated with the cultural and the ethnic are to be rendered visible. All too often - in both social-scientific and popular discourse - the social dimension is overshadowed by culturalising stereotypes.

Culture is a result of human integration. It is rooted as much in social concordance as in material causes. The social and the cultural are variable and intertwined. Hence culture cannot be interpreted as a uniform and final product of settled symbols and meanings. Various experiences related to social positioning are mediated through cultural representations. These lie at the heart of the way an identity is formed among individual members of 'ethnic groups'. Ethnicity is thus a dynamic phenomenon, interwoven with ideas of class, gender and race. Neither culture nor ethnicity, then, can be defined as clearly delimited and internally uniform categories derived from an original source. The cultural constructions of reality spring rather from various sources and are spread through many streams.

The consequence of culture being considered as immutable obviously alters any discursive construction of 'immigrants'. The cultural boundaries formulated thereby are often based on an ethnocentric contrasting of traditional and modern, which then facilitates social stratification and the categorising and ordering of people along ethnic lines. It must be recognised that any notions of culture and cultural identity that are developed in multiethnic and multicultural contexts need to be reassessed in relation to migration. Cultural exchange is the manifestation of new identities, ethnicities and (political) solidarities. The anti-essentialist critique of research on culture and identity has led to a change of focus, from identity to identification, which in turn forms the basis of new solidarities and alliances.

In studies on youth culture during recent decades, the dynamic character of new cultural expressions has usually been related to class, generational
conflicts, unemployment, social fragmentation, crisis of identity and to the global expansion of the market. Attention has been accorded to the development of composite social communities, which cut across ethnic boundaries and are articulated through new cross-border cultural systems of meaning. These function as collective self-confirmations on the basis of which alternative and authentic appearances on the public scene take form. Transcultural fusion into a form of syncretic culture acquires importance for both identity and community. In today's ethnically complex and politically charged environments, in the suburbs or inner cities of international metropolises, particularly those in Sweden, culture has acquired a new resonance and meaning. Expansive artistic developments among the young find avant-garde expression in text, tone and image, often with a political content, which initially mostly concerned anti-racism and the demand for equality and belonging.

Young Swedes with a non-Swedish background are still - even when they were born and raised in Sweden - referred to as 'immigrants'. In constructing an identification with Sweden, these young people challenge their current status as 'foreigners' or Others. It is for their cause that the constitutional recognition of a multicultural society is most important, since only a progressive process within such frames can realise a future democratic society.