

# Hot Love and Cold People

## Sexual Liberalism as Political Escapism in Radical Sweden

*Carl Marklund*

### Summary

The longstanding association of the “North” with “rationality” on the one hand and “Sweden” with “sex” on the other fulfilled a particular role in the *philosophical geography* of the radical 1960s and 1970s. By looking at works by Susan Sontag and Roland Huntford, this article proposes that Sweden could aid both radicals and conservatives in making sense of the “Western” heritage in an era of fundamental cultural change. While Sontag regarded sexual liberalism as part of a deeper fear of conflict, Huntford saw Swedish sexual liberalism as a result of political control. Both Sontag and Huntford agreed that in the end, the Swedes were not “authentically” liberated. This kind of “septentrionalism” helped Sontag and Huntford to construct a cultural compass with a negative North pole of cold, rational, and unnatural “modernity” as representative of elements which they both sought to combat in their respective home countries.

### Zusammenfassung

Der altbekannte Zusammenhang zwischen dem „Norden“ und „Rationalität“ einerseits und „Schweden“ und „Sex“ andererseits spielte in der *philosophischen Geographie* der radikalen sechziger und siebziger Jahre eine spezifische Rolle. Eine Betrachtung von Texten Susan Sontags und Roland Huntfords zeigt, dass das Beispiel Schwedens Radikalen wie Konservativen dazu dienen konnte, das „westliche“ Erbe in einer Zeit fundamentalen Wandels zu interpretieren. Während Sontag sexuelle Liberalität als Ausdruck von Konfliktangst ansah, betrachtete Huntford sie als Resultat politischer Kontrolle. Sontag wie Huntford kamen zu dem Schluss, dass die Schweden nicht „authentisch“ befreit seien. Diese Form des „Septentrionalismus“ erlaubte es ihnen, einen kulturellen Kompass zu konstruieren, dessen negativ besetzter Nordpol kalter, rationaler und unnatürlicher „Modernität“ Elemente verkörperte, die sie in ihren jeweiligen Ländern bekämpfen wollten.

---

*Carl Marklund, Ph.D., is a postdoc fellow at the Nordic Centre of Excellence “The Nordic Welfare State – Historical Foundations and Future Challenges” (NordWel) at the University of Helsinki. Contact: carl.marklund@helsinki.fi*

## Introduction

There are two powerful myths or stories about the North in general, and about Sweden in particular. These two myths have exercised a strong influence upon how the Nordic countries have been perceived abroad. One is the myth of Nordic sexual liberalism, often expressed through the image of a raunchy kind of particularly “Swedish sin”. The other is that of the Nordic welfare state, as epitomized by the proverbially rational “Swedish model”.

According to the latter story, Sweden has been a planner’s paradise, indeed a “model society”, where so-called “social engineers” – seemingly with the complete agreement of the Swedish people in general – have been able to tear down many of the traditional “barriers” which had previously divided social life into categories such as private and public, proper and sinful, natural and unnatural. This breaking down of internal borders within Swedish society was noticed and commented upon internationally, not the least since it was also to some extent (un)consciously promoted by Swedes themselves abroad.

Outside commentators discussing Sweden in the 1960s and 1970s often found these two aspects of Swedish modernity – sexual liberty on the one hand and rational control on the other – rather paradoxical and quite uniquely Swedish. Yet, they presented a logical contradiction, given the past and present of Swedish culture and politics: A rational society which consciously attempted to modernize and rationalize itself – i.e., the behaviour of its inhabitants – would of course have to do something about the many “backward” and “repressive” traditions which after all characterized the traditional Swedish society of old.<sup>1</sup> While modernization also proceeded rapidly in other countries – a modernization which in North America and Western Europe after World War II was largely driven by consumerism and market forces – Sweden represented a

<sup>1</sup> These ideas are long from outdated in Swedish public rhetoric, but make a wholly central part of it. See for example the Swedish Associations for Sexuality Education (Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning, RFSU) promotional material on the short film *Talking about sex* where it is said that “[i]t is possible to change outdated gender roles” ([http://www.rfsu.se/ymep\\_site.asp](http://www.rfsu.se/ymep_site.asp), December 2, 2008).

conscious and somehow political attempt to modernize society not only economically, but (more importantly) politically and culturally as well.<sup>2</sup>

At the centre of this presumably Swedish paradox between liberty and discipline was the claim that breaking down traditional borders would lead to the emancipation of “natural” forces and desires. Sex was only one among many natural urges which made up part of human life, the new message went. As such it changed from being something sinful (unless inside of heterosexual marriage, that is), which only promiscuous people engaged in, to becoming something natural which everyone needed in order to be happy, healthy, and satisfied members of society.

### **Liberty as discipline: Hot love and cold people**

However, it was not all that clear that the Swedes themselves were the happiest and most satisfied people on earth, even though they arguably might have found themselves living in one of the healthiest, richest, and most peaceful societies in the world in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Even though they could enjoy (an unparalleled?) sexual liberty, they were also seen as a rather morose and sombre lot by others, and often perceived themselves as such. Maybe, it was speculated abroad, sex and control were somehow related, not the least since both of these images were clearly visible alongside one and another in Ingmar Bergman’s movies which begun to gain international repute in the 1950s. Sweden was increasingly seen as characterized by “heiße Liebe und kühle Menschen” – “hot love and cold people” – as the German magazine *Der Spiegel* stated in 1969.<sup>4</sup>

This article will take a closer look at two commentators on Sweden who both made a point out of the Swedish relationship to sex. One is Susan Sontag (1933–2004),

<sup>2</sup> Indeed, from the 1930s and onwards, attitudes about sex could very well begin to function as a measure of modernity just as the number of doctors or telephones, or the length of electrified railroad already did.

<sup>3</sup> Not the least this was so as this release was embraced by the political and scientific establishment of the country and as Swedish sexual emancipation subsequently seemed to contain a slight grain of manipulation.

<sup>4</sup> “Frei von Tabus”. In: *Der Spiegel* 21 (1969:39), 22nd September 1969, 132, cited in: Schröder, Stephan Michael: *Mehr Spaß mit Schwedinnen? Funktionen eines deutschen Heterostereotyps*. Berlin 1996 (= Arbeitspapiere ”Gemeinschaften”; 3).

American cultural critic and one of the leading figures of the “New Left” and “radical chic” at the time, and the other is Roland Huntford (born 1927), a British-South African conservative journalist.<sup>5</sup>

These very different witnesses, observing Swedish society from very privileged positions, found Sweden particularly useful for making sense of their own cultures for their respective audiences – emerging radical counter-elites in the USA for Sontag, entrenched conservative elites in the United Kingdom for Huntford.

Despite their very different motives and varying nature – Huntford spent a dense three hundred pages on his impressions of Sweden, while Sontag conveyed her ideas on the country and its culture in the form of a letter – both these comments offer early adventures in a genre which only much later would be given a name and enter the vocabulary of the social sciences, mainly through the work of Paul Rabinow, namely in “anthropology of reason”.<sup>6</sup> Unlike most anthropologists doing field work among the *Nacirema*,<sup>7</sup> these commentators had both been invited to come to Sweden and enjoyed particular privileges while staying there. Sontag, for example, came to Sweden for the first time in the revolutionary year of 1968 at the invitation of the Swedish Ministry of

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it was not only conservatives who found surprising and questionable developments in Sweden at the time, see for example Reiche, Reimut: *Sexualität und Klassenkampf. Zur Abwehr repressiver Entsublimierung*. Frankfurt/Main 1968 (= Probleme sozialistischer Politik; 9), English translation as *Sexuality and Class Struggle*, London 1970; Ebert, Teresa L.: ”Alexandra Kollontai and Red Love”. In: *Against the Current* 14 (1999:81); see also discussion in Glover, Nikolas and Carl Marklund: “Arabian Nights in the Midnight Sun? Exploring the Temporal Structure of Sexual Geographies”. In: *Historisk tidskrift* 129 (2009) [forthcoming].

<sup>6</sup> Rabinow, Paul: *Essays in the Anthropology of Reason*. Princeton 1997.

<sup>7</sup> In 1956, Horace Miner, an American anthropologist, played a good-natured trick on his colleagues by turning the conceptual apparatus of anthropology upon the Americans, spelled backwards as the “Nacirema” – thus turning the investigatory gaze upon the observing subject itself, upon “the Self”, that is. Beside the many humorous effects of such a turning of the tables – it became evident that there is a primitivist primacy or bias in anthropological method – Miner’s paper also provided a textbook example of the heuristic value of *Verfremdung*. By distancing the Americans from themselves and see them as “the Other” Miner invited to a deeper and more critical understanding of the Self. See Miner, Horace: “Body Ritual among the Nacirema”. In: *American Anthropologist* N.S. 58 (1956), 503–507.

Foreign Affairs on account of her criticism of the Vietnam War.<sup>8</sup> While in Sweden, she got an offer from Swedish production company Sandrews to shoot her first full-length film, *Duet for Cannibals* (1969). While the plot revolves around a young Swedish couple, both alienated leftists, who enter a destructive relationship with a revolutionary refugee and his “exotic” (Southern, that is) wife – including a bit of sex and pornography, of course – there is not much to tell us about Sontag’s view of Sweden. Rather, Sontag’s concern seems to have been more general, as sex and pornography was just one among many other forms of cannibalism by which the protagonists of the film fed off one and another in order to ease the pain of their meaningless existence. Indeed, the term of “cannibalism” alluded to in the title refers to the way in which alienation in modern society make individuals easily replaceable: “Pornography is a theatre of types, never individuals” as Sontag put it in an essay on pornography she published around the same time.<sup>9</sup>

### **A Letter from Sweden**

But Sontag’s brief visit to Sweden did not only result in a film; she also felt the urge to “tell about Sweden”, as she experienced a “profound quarrel” with “the quality of

<sup>8</sup> The same year she undertook a trip to North Vietnam which eventually resulted in a text entitled “Trip to Hanoi” in which Sontag contrasted the simple lifestyle of the North Vietnamese with the hypermodern consumerism of the Americans. The text was later published in an anthology of essays which also included a piece on “Bergman’s *Persona*”. The two topics can, put side by side in the anthology as they are, both in their own ways illustrate the difference between these two destinations in the mind of the globetrotting intellectual, a simple “trip” to a simple country on the one hand and a dark analysis of a complex “persona” on the other. See Sontag, Susan: “Trip to Hanoi”. In: Idem: *Styles of Radical Will*. New York 1969; idem: “Bergman’s *Persona*”. Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> While a vocal group among contemporary feminists argued that heterosexual pornography was demeaning and patriarchal, Sontag for her part argued that pornography could be considered just as legitimate as any other genre of art and literature. While pornography usually had only one aim in sight – to induce sexual stimulation – other art might have a broader agenda. However, the broader agenda may serve to suppress – and thereby to amplify – the intended sexual stimulation. Art itself, Sontag famously argued, was mostly eroticized aesthetics anyway. See Sontag, Susan: “The Pornographic Imagination”. In: Idem: *Styles of Radical Will*. New York 1969.

Swedish life” whilst working there.<sup>10</sup> Primarily, it was the individual passivity and personal isolation of the Swedes which irritated her, and most of all their silence. She found the plausible cause of this silence in the climate of placidity which reigned there – *konflikträdsla*, “conflictphobia” as the Swedes themselves called it – a fear of aggression which she found to be “little short of pathological”. This anxiety over potential aggression lay at the root of her analysis of Swedish society, which she found to be “uncompetitive without being genuinely cooperative”. Beyond the fact that such fear of potential conflict would hamper interaction with others, this fear would only loosen its grip over the Swedes when they were drunk. This was the reason why alcohol had achieved a “mythic” status as “the fundamental metaphor” of national Swedish behaviour: “Because of the high value placed on restraint, there is a great fear of letting go – and, of course, a vast craving to just that”, Sontag found. As “their national form of self-rape”, drink, rather than sex, carried the burden of Swedish guilt.<sup>11</sup>

While the “isolated quality” of Stockholm street life did little to impress this native New Yorker and globetrotter, there were advantages for younger women and persecuted minorities to be had in such a quiet setting, she noted. Neither blacks nor beauties would stir any attention, and would subsequently run less risks there than elsewhere. On the other hand, there was not much desirable attention to be had either. There was a lot of porn around, Sontag noted, but it was all woefully “anti-erotic” in her mind. Interestingly, “Sweden’s mediocre cuisine” was even more revealing about Swedish deficiency in the department of sensuality than the quality of its porn, a shortcoming which simply reflected the lack of “intensity” in Swedish social life more generally, Sontag mused.<sup>12</sup> However, Sontag also saw the Swedish alienation (resulting from this anxiety of aggression) as enabling the strong Swedish sense of egalitarianism, especially as regards government policy on women’s equality. Yet, for all of its radicalism with regard to sexual liberty and gender equality, Sweden was obviously not a social-

<sup>10</sup> Sontag, Susan: “A Letter from Sweden”. In: *Ramparts*, July 1969, 23–38.

<sup>11</sup> Drink could also avert and channel the urge of the individual to get high on his or her own ego, an urge that had to be repressed in Sweden, due to the anti-individualistic so-called “Jante Law” the first commandment of which is “Don’t think you *are* anything” (Du skal ikke tro du er noget).

<sup>12</sup> Sontag 1969, as footnote 10.

ist country, she noted.<sup>13</sup> Quite on the contrary, Sweden's "vision of a conflict-less society" was so deeply rooted that "New Left" energies could not be usefully applied in the society in which they emerged. Instead, they "are fed almost exclusively" by a concern with international issues, especially Vietnam – which incidentally happened to be the reason Sontag found herself in Sweden to begin with. In fact, there was a strong tendency to wear egalitarianism as a mask, which would not only mollify or even prevent the much-feared taboo of Swedish culture – conflict – but also serve to simulate moral engagement and political activism, where there was little of either.<sup>14</sup> In fact, Sontag found, "left politics" served as a rival only to the famous Swedish love of "nature"<sup>15</sup> in being a "self-alienating" if "respectable" passion among Swedes. Leftism was simply a seemingly safe way of venting resentment in a society which suppressed vast inner tensions, Sontag noted. Liberation "from the centuries' old chronic state of depression" would require the Swedes to achieve a *real* revolution of their own minds, Sontag concluded, a revolution which would have to go much further than the "sexual revolution" they claimed to have embraced politically and accomplished culturally.<sup>16</sup>

### The New Totalitarians

While Sontag's critique of Sweden – of its establishment as well as of its radicals – seem not to have spurred much reaction in Sweden, despite, or perhaps because of, the official sanction of her stay and her work there, Roland Huntford's book *The New Totalitarians* did.<sup>17</sup> Writing a couple of years later, but drawing upon material he had collected while

<sup>13</sup> Sontag saw for example the reputed skilfulness of Swedes in mediation and diplomacy as unrelated to the (obviously mistaken) claim that Sweden was a socialist country; in each case something like "false consciousness" serves positive reformist ends by "neutralizing" ideological strife.

<sup>14</sup> Sontag 1969, as footnote 10.

<sup>15</sup> And of what is considered "natural", one might add.

<sup>16</sup> Sontag 1969, as footnote 10.

<sup>17</sup> Huntford, Roland: *The New Totalitarians*. London 1971. It even provoked an official inquiry. In a recent article, South African historian Frederick Hale has studied the Swedish reception of Huntford's book, as well as how various Swedish representatives responded to his attack upon Sweden as a nation and as a polity. See Hale, Frederick: "Brave New World in Sweden: Roland Huntford's *The New Totalitarians*". In: *Scandinavian Studies* 78 (2006) 167–191; Lennerhed, Lena: *Frihet att njuta – Sexualdebatten i Sverige på 1960-talet*. Stockholm 1994.

stationed in Stockholm as a reporter for the conservative British daily newspaper *The Observer*, Huntford used very similar images to those of Sontag to describe the Swedes, and reached very similar conclusions, although he approached the problem from a distinctively conservative and thus opposite standpoint from Sontag.

Believing that the Swedes had in fact come closer than the Soviets in realizing Dystopia as shown in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Huntford's main thesis was that the Swedish social democratic party, like Huxley's "new totalitarians", relied less upon the violence and intimidation of the old totalitarians than upon sly persuasion and soft manipulation in order to achieve its goals.<sup>18</sup> His argumentation drew heavily upon the idea that the Swedes – as a nation – supplied a uniquely appropriate "material" for such a policy, arguing that "Sweden is a control experiment on an isolated and sterilized [*sic!*] subject"<sup>19</sup>. In particular, the influence of the state and official ideology were the most visible in the most private of matters, where little or no consciously "political" control had stretched before.

In a chapter entitled "The Sexual Branch of Social Engineering", Huntford discussed the way in which the Swedish political and administrative elites had intervened in the sexual mores of the Swedish people: As "security" had become the "creed" of Swedish political language (which allowed for little political excitement or genuine debate over issues of principle), Swedish politics had become reduced into a mere question of administration and political technology. As a consequence, the political concept of "liberty" had been confined entirely to the field of sex in Swedish language, Huntford argued.<sup>20</sup> It did so through the idea that sexual freedom represented the most central and most important of all urges of liberty in humans.

In effect, the Swedish government had "taken what it is pleased to call 'the sexual revolution' under its wing", expecting that adolescents "might repay with their votes" in return, Huntford suggested. It was an attempt "to win over the young through their

<sup>18</sup> Huntford's vision of "totalitarianism" was apparently less concerned with the question of how to gain power than the issue of how to exercise it. Thus, Sweden represented a warning signal to other non-communist societies as well.

<sup>19</sup> Huntford 1971, as footnote 17, 348.

<sup>20</sup> This characterization, however, stands somewhat in contrast to Huntford's own identification of social democratic emphasis on radical egalitarianism as the guiding ideology of the welfare state as stated elsewhere in the book.

gonads”, as the journalist put it.<sup>21</sup> However, Huntford came to the conclusion that there was little to support the idea that “Swedish sin” – the most popular of the modern “legends of the north” – was any more “sinful” than the sexual mores in any of the neighbouring Nordic countries.<sup>22</sup> In fact, it was doubtful “whether there is any difference between the sexual activity of the younger English and the younger Swedes today, except that the former may be more romantic”. The difference is that the changes in the sexual behaviour of the Swedes is “a matter of official direction”, while the English simply follow the change of the *Zeitgeist*.

However, there was a more sinister side to this social democratic adoption to the *Zeitgeist* of the Swinging Sixties: While the inhabitants of “the World State” which Huxley imagined in the 1930s accepted their servitude easier after consuming hallucinogenic drugs and engaging in emotionless and mechanical sex, in Sweden of the social democrats, sex had become the vicarious passion of a youth otherwise trapped in boredom and the “engineered consent” which characterized Swedish society. In the same vein, Huntford suggested that sexual “licence is not necessarily a spontaneous thing, and it may be just as politically motivated as constraint”<sup>23</sup>. “Sex”, Huntford concluded, functioned as “the escape valve of society”.<sup>24</sup>

So what was Huntford’s problem with Sweden and its social democrats, then, if the direction they followed was determined by the *Zeitgeist* rather than anything else? Should he not rather have turned against the *Zeitgeist* itself, as this provided “the new totalitarians” with a tool of control?

Huntford’s answer was as shrewd as it was circumscribed: Swedish sexual education, Huntford argued, might look pluralistic enough on the face of it. Teachers were “required to adopt a neutral pose, and to explain different moral codes without prejudice so that children may choose”. But in the end, what Huntford found to be an “amoral view” prevailed, resulting in “a physiological conception of sex as a bodily function, to be practised in the interests of good health, like eating, drinking, keeping one’s bowels

<sup>21</sup> Huntford 1971, as footnote 17, 328 f.

<sup>22</sup> Nordic people all took “a mundane view of the sexual act” because of their lack of contact with “the Judeo-Christian morality of the West” as well as the lingering of “old Norse hedonism” and “consequently treat the sexual issue in the most natural manner”. Ibid., 328.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 335.

open and a reasonable amount of sport”<sup>25</sup>. By aligning itself with the *Zeitgeist*, and portraying this alignment as one of neutrality, sex was being “politicized” by design from above in Sweden, while it might be politicized through the *Zeitgeist* – from below, as it were – elsewhere, Huntford concluded. In a talk with Dr. Gösta Rodhe, director of the department of sexual education at the Directorate of Schools, Huntford asked whether the sheer volume of discussion concerning sex in Sweden might not destroy “feeling”. “Perhaps”, Rodhe is said to have answered. “But we don’t want children starting their sex in a cloud of emotion. Emotion has got to be removed from sex. What we want is that children talk it over, and come together *rationally*.”<sup>26</sup>

“The party” – the social democrats, that is – has preferred to not be seen working too hard at this change, Huntford asserted. But “through suitable kneading of public opinion by other agents, to give the impression of answering a need rather than enforcing an idea”, they had succeeded in promoting their own vision.<sup>27</sup> This idea had been that sex is a need just like any other need.<sup>28</sup> This sexual ideology – represented above all by the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education (Riksförbundet för sexuell upplysning, RFSU)<sup>29</sup> – has become concerned with “erotic technique”, reflecting “a mechanical view of sex”.<sup>30</sup> As a predictable result of the physical emphasis put upon sex, which had “enveloped the

<sup>25</sup> Interestingly, Huntford’s understanding of this “neutrality” in sexual education is remarkably similar to the widespread criticism of Swedish lack of morals with regard to the nation’s neutrality during World War II, and the equally widespread notion that neutrality masks interest. *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>26</sup> This interest, Huntford collected from his interview with Rodhe, came from the fact that since “there’s a lack of tension in Swedish politics, younger people have got to find release and excitement in sexual tension instead”. See *ibid.*, 331.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>28</sup> Somewhat contradictory with regard to his overall understanding of the Swedes as exceedingly malleable, Huntford noted that this idea had been around for a long time, preceding the social democrats, and had required hard work on the part of the “social engineers” before it had been finally accepted by “a hostile public opinion” in the 1950s. *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>29</sup> Today, RFSU embraces a broader and more international agenda, not only reflecting the development discourse which was emerging at the time of Huntford’s writing, but also the multicultural character of contemporary Swedish society. The RFSU slogan of today is, incidentally, *frihet att njuta*, “liberty to enjoy”.

<sup>30</sup> Incidentally, Huntford chose a phrasing very close to Sontag’s with regard to “mechanical sex”. However, it has not been possible to ascertain whether Huntford had access to Sontag’s writings about Sweden when he penned his book, or if he even knew about her commentary.

population in a permanent cloud of *depressio post coitus*”, a “sexual *ennui*” loomed large, Huntford found. Just like Sontag, Huntford discovered that while “most of Swedish society is littered with taboo, sex has been absolutely cleansed of it”, in what seemed to be an attempt “to remove all guilt feelings”, cueing nicely with the myth of “Swedish sin”.<sup>31</sup> While the Swedes think little of the massive regimentation of other aspects of their private lives, such as the control of their alcohol consumption, they are “extraordinarily proud of this one freedom”, seeing in their sexual liberty some kind of proof of their “superiority” above others. “But it is not permissiveness”, Huntford concluded, “it is licensed release” which had only been made possible after public intrusion into and channelling of that which, according to Huntford, “should be the last resort of privacy” – namely the sexuality of the individual.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>31</sup> This lack of taboo, or playfulness, if you like, may for example be illustrated by the recently released booklets entitled *Dicktionary – What every guy needs to know about his knob and Pussypedia – What every woman needs to know about her genitals*, which may be downloaded at the RFSU website ([http://www.rfsu.se/publications\\_rfsu.asp?cachecommand=bypass&pageLayout=1&-](http://www.rfsu.se/publications_rfsu.asp?cachecommand=bypass&pageLayout=1&-), December 2, 2008). It would indeed have been interesting to hear how Sontag and Huntford would have analyzed this initiative and its nomenclature beyond the apparent distinction between “guy-woman” and “knob-genitals” being made.

<sup>32</sup> A leftist radical – and the son of Sweden’s foremost political family, social engineers Gunnar Myrdal and Alva Myrdal – Jan Myrdal was the *enfant terrible* of Swedish cultural life, and would probably have agreed in part with what Huntford and Sontag had to say about the relationship between sex and leftism in Sweden: Sarcastically criticizing the pretentious internationalism and ostentatious social engagement of Swedish political establishment and its “hired” radicals – “the whores of reason”, as Myrdal would later call them – Myrdal saw that Sweden was a thoroughly capitalist society where radicalism had become a servant of power under false doctrines of neutrality and the so-called *tredje ståndpunkten*, “the Third Standpoint”, a perspective which proclaimed that both superpowers were in principle equally corrupt. Instead of tackling the “real” issues of subordination – class struggle abroad and at home – Swedish radicals chose and found a comfortable enemy in the obsolete sexual morality of the past, Myrdal thought: “One wants a nice radicalism, while not entirely acceptable to the Royal Court, at least acceptable to the Government. A radicalism which is terribly radical but entirely harmless and does not step on anybody’s toes. Well – the sexual clavi may be trampled upon if absolutely necessary.” “Man vill ha en snäll, om inte hovfäbig, så dock tegelbacks-fäbig radikalism. En radikalism som är väldigt radikal men helt ofarlig och inte trampar någon på tårna. Jaa [sic!] – de sexuella liktorna kan ju i nödfall få trampas på.” Myrdal, Jan: “Återbördad till fosterjorden”. In: *Aftonbladet*, 31st December 1954. See also Witoszek, Nina and Lars Trägårdh (eds.): *Culture and Crisis*. New York 2002; Huntford 1971, as footnote 17, 336 f.

### Sweden: Modern and Exotic?

While Huntford's book was heavily criticized in Swedish press, none of Huntford's critics seem to have taken his idea on sexual liberalism as a form of political escapism very seriously, at least not seriously enough to argue against.<sup>33</sup> In short, neither the curious combination of sexual liberty with rational control in that country (the theme which united both Sontag and Huntford in their civilizational diagnosis of Sweden), nor the ways in which the intended emancipation of the collective may result in the manipulation of the individual seems to have provoked much critical debate in Sweden itself.<sup>34</sup> The silence of the Swedish establishment on this particular aspect of Huntford's critique indicates that the latter in at least this respect may have hit the mark.

While Sontag and Huntford agreed that Sweden was particularly illustrative of submissiveness and alienation as well as the great social transformations which Western society underwent in other places as well, they differed somewhat in how they understood its cause, in particular its eventual "Swedishness".

As Huntford searched for the roots in a lack of historical and cultural identity, Sontag found them in a specifically and pathological Swedish fear of aggression, a fear which made the Swedes inward-bound and thus an easy prey to their own bureaucrats and experts who told them what to feel and what to do.<sup>35</sup> In both cases, one gets a strange

<sup>33</sup> While Sontag's letters from Sweden seem to have received little comment in Sweden, Huntford's book made headline news, most of them rejecting it outright, and many of Huntford's interviewees claiming that they had been misrepresented or not even met the author at all. Rodhe, for example, denied having said what Huntford reported him as saying.

<sup>34</sup> Instead, this *problématique* would only become central in the discussions on the social engineering, *social ingenjörskonst*, of the People's Home, *folkhemmet*, which gained momentum in the late 1980s and characterized much of public debate in Sweden throughout the 1990s, although elements of the discussion played a role in the early 1980s discussions on the fall of the welfare state.

<sup>35</sup> Huntford seems to have regarded Swedish culture as either being something of a *tabula rasa* upon which generations of social engineers from Gustavus Vasa via Axel Oxenstierna and Rutger Maclean to the Myrdals, had been able to leave their successive imprints, or at least as something which made the Swedes believe themselves that they lacked any culture which could stand in the way of rationality, normality, and progress. By inference, Huntford found, Swedes believed that other peoples had "culture", while they themselves were just "normal".

feeling that the Swedish bureaucrats and politicians must have been a distinctively different breed of people than the ordinary Swedes, full of activity, conviction, and invention, i.e., pretty much like governing elites everywhere.

While Sontag saw the Swedish acceptance or even embracing of pornography, their love for nature as well as their leftist engagement as more or less accepted means by which to escape the anxiety and limitations of Swedish society,<sup>36</sup> Huntford included sex – as well as drugs and travel – as vents for pent-up boredom and resentment.<sup>37</sup> The sexual safety valve – together with that of nature and leftism, as argued by Sontag – functioned as a legitimate release from the frustrations and tensions brought about by regimentation of the welfare state in Huntford's version, from a cultural deficit in Sontag's. However, culture and welfare were intrinsically interconnected and fed off one another.

Swedish culture in fact provided the clue to the puzzles of both of these authors. Both Sontag and Huntford found that the Swedes were not as radical as they claimed. Or, rather, that their radicalism did not always result from the higher motives they held out as the driving force behind their beliefs and actions. (When does it?) Noting that supreme tolerance as well as moral indignation is easily extended to those conditions which nobody *really* cares about – either because one does not have the power to affect it, or, more commonly, because one is not directly affected by these conditions oneself – both Sontag and Huntford called the sincerity of Swedish “egalitarianism” into doubt.<sup>38</sup> The willingness of the Swedes to confront injustice, both noted, had a

<sup>36</sup> Huntford agreed with Sontag in this regard, and suggested that Swedish anti-Americanism had taken on a hinge of the two minutes' hate in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), and that Johnson had become the Goldstein of the Swedes. See Huntford 1971, as footnote 17, 341.

<sup>37</sup> Alcohol, they both agreed, was a different matter where the Swedes were not very tolerant at all, presumably since alcoholism has high social costs, while they presumably calculated that contraceptives and sexual hygiene would render sex medically and socially harmless – fewer unwanted pregnancies, reduced venereal disease, and less cause for sexual crime.

<sup>38</sup> Sontag, for example, found that Swedish sexual tolerance was less the result of a deeply felt commitment to honour the values of diversity than an unwillingness to risk confrontation over some moot point. Curiously, then, a radical voice from the left – Susan Sontag's – seem to find support in an equally radical voice from the right – Roland Huntford's – when it comes to the morality of Swedish society.

tendency to increase in proportion to the distance of the potential adversary, which seems to be one of the few “truly” human traits either of these authors assigned to this people, but also curiously in line with the particularly Swedish “conflictophobia” which Sontag felt she had detected in the Swedes.<sup>39</sup>

### **Reversing the romantics of sex and sin**

Speaking of humanity, it is important to note that in their psychoanalytical musings on the relationship between Sweden, sex and sin, both Sontag and Huntford made ample use of that figure which is so rarely found in bewildering reality, namely “the average human”, an invention of 19<sup>th</sup> century statisticians. As the concept of “the average Swede” allows for the simultaneous generalization of the individual personality of a whole people, it is perhaps not so surprising that both Sontag and Huntford at times sound close to becoming the Freudian sex therapists of a whole nation, the psychoanalysts of an entire people, arguing that whatever the people living in that country would do, they would always somehow end up suppressing their “real” and “true” feelings under an overpowering *ego*, which in its benevolent despotism even pointed out the accepted ways in which the suppressed *id* may find compensatory relief, whether through a stroll in the forest, through leftism or through sex.<sup>40</sup>

There is a strong undercurrent of the romantic cult of authenticity and of the natural in this Freudian approach of both Huntford and Sontag: The idea that the Swedish society – as is indeed the fate of most societies under modernity – has lost contact with itself, with its natural and authentic centre. Through locating sexual liberalism in modern and rational Sweden there is also an interesting reversion of the ordinary coupling of the rational as artificial and the sexual as natural taking place which is well worth a closer look.

There has for a long time been a predominantly (but not necessarily) “male” sexual fantasy of a somehow “free” love which is made possible only because of the “natural”

<sup>39</sup> Humans do tend to honour civil courage not because it is in abundant supply, but because it is so rare.

<sup>40</sup> The reasoning comes close to the idea of “repressive tolerance” as originated by Herbert Marcuse and later relayed by Slavoj Žižek, among others.

naivety of the predominantly “female” native, such as the one enjoyed by European sailors, missionaries, and artists when philandering about the Southern Seas – either bringing civilization or fleeing it. But embracing this opportunity is somehow fraught with danger, with the risk of attaching the “sin” to one’s own Self: Enjoying nature is always, to some degree, also a question of spoiling nature.

The rare and possibly novel thing which happens in the sexual fantasy which emerges from “Swedish sin” and which is commented upon by Sontag and Huntford, is that the “reason” of the Swedish “female” in fact liberates the typically “male” outsider from the burden of his own traditionally conceived sin. What is exotic and possibly titillating in this message is that rationality replaces naivety as the sexually coded core of the image. This is also where “Swedish sin” becomes the most quintessential sin, the sin which is so sinful that it even rejects its own sinfulness as it unceremoniously and straightforwardly – rationally, even – denies the possibility of any sin altogether. There are just natural needs and a right to enjoy their fulfilment.

Of course, sin and sophisticated promiscuity are powerful propellants of sexual imagery, just as the image of natural and uncomplicated so-called “casual sex” might be, whether set on a tropical island or a frozen forest. A curious aspect of the rational side of “Swedish sin” is that exactly this rationality makes sex into a natural “need” which may be felt equally acutely (or not!) by both parties. Interestingly, this refocusing upon the sexual urge as the basis for a new “natural” sexual morality also makes the participants more easily replaceable. Thus, it threatens the power balance in the game of desire or the art of love, and activates a dual concern: Is X good enough for me? Am I good enough for X?

This worry might also be turned into a freedom, and it might explain the rather curious coupling of rational sex with pornographic liberalism in the image of “Swedish sin”: Indeed, if pornography is a theatre of types, as Sontag held, rational sex replaces the individual (and the passion?) with the act (and the pleasure?). However, where rationality enters (even if it is this kind of most “sinful” rationality which denies its own sinfulness), emotion evaporates. By this standard trope in the ongoing drama between enlightenment and romanticism in Western thought, rational sinless sex must also become artificial and joyless copulation almost by inference. Neither the natural and healthy beauty of sex associated with the South nor the decadent and titillating desire of sex associated with the East seem to have found it particularly easy to survive this relocation to the rational and controlled North. I would here like to suggest that this *philosophical geography* of sex fulfilled a number of particular roles at a critical mo-

ment in Western self-understanding, particularly so among the New Left, but also among old conservatives as a kind of exoticism of reason and of the North alike, a sort of “septentrionalism” as Katie Wales has paraphrased Edward Said’s famous notion of orientalism,<sup>41</sup> or “borealism” in the words of Peter Stadius<sup>42</sup>.

## Conclusion

When coming to an end of this brief essay on the relationship between Sweden and sex, we must first ask: Why did for example Sontag experience a “profound quarrel” with Swedish life at all in the first place? Why, if Swedish society was so uniquely isolated and coded by fear of conflict? Would it not merely be a concern of the Swedes themselves, possibly of some marginal interests for readers interested in curiosities? Sontag’s level of engagement with the topic seems to suggest otherwise: For her, Sweden apparently illustrated the sublime tension between these two opposites, between the cold rational control of the West and the fervent, irrational liberty promised by the “New Left” and increasingly represented by the equally “New” East – in this case the People’s Republic of China and North Vietnam, rather than the Soviet Union. At the same time, Sontag could vent the insecurity felt by many among the New Left about their own possibility of ever overcoming the limits set upon them by a “Western” civilization they detested but undeniably were part of.

In this sense, Sontag’s criticism of Sweden actually focused more upon the ways in which the Swedes were more stereotypically Western – and thus more American – than her American readers themselves. In short, through their materialism, their consumerism, their inhibitions, their alienation, and last but not least, their clumsiness and lack of spontaneity in sensual matters – their incapability of “freaking out,” as Sontag put it – her Swedes betray a fundamental similarity with the otherwise so different Americans, which the vanilla socialism on the part of the Swedes did little to conceal.

<sup>41</sup> Wales, Katie: ”North and South: A Linguistic Divide? Inaugural Lecture, June 10th 1999”. In: *Reporter* 439, 27th September 1999 (<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/reporter/439/kwales.htm>, December 2, 2008).

<sup>42</sup> Stadius, Peter: *Resan till norr. Spanska Nordenbilder kring sekelskiftet 1900*. Helsingfors 2005. (= Bidrag till kännedom av Finlands natur och folk; 164).

In this sense Sontag offered a kind of “septentrionalism” or “borealism” which allowed radical Americans – the readers of *Ramparts*, we may assume – to behold a society which was in many ways similar to their own, but also, thankfully, different, a mutual logic of difference *and* similarity which enforced each other.<sup>43</sup> It simply moved some of the negative traits of the West up to the North: Only in comparison with the Swedes would the Americans appear somewhat less negatively Western, or Northern, that is.<sup>44</sup>

Sontag’s scathing criticism of Sweden can be compared with her high appraisal of North Vietnam. When asked “Why do you think Americans feel that the past is a burden”, Sontag responded: “Because, unlike Vietnam, this isn’t a ‘real’ country but a made-up, willed country, a meta-country”. While Sweden did not have the American experience of being a land of immigration, where many wished to forget where they came from, the Swedes certainly shared what Sontag called “The essential American relation [to] the past is not to carry too much of it. The past impedes action, saps energy. It’s a burden because it modifies or contradicts optimism.” In that sense, Sweden, too, was a meta-country, also in Swedish self imagination as Arne Ruth has argued.<sup>45</sup>

What was Huntford’s problem with Sweden, then? Huntford sought to prove that Sweden was an ultimately Eastern European country, and that the Swedes were akin to the Russians in their lack of contact with Western culture.<sup>46</sup> However, while being submissive in the extreme – supposedly all by themselves, by nature, that is – the Swedes nevertheless had to be, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, one might think, manipulated by their rulers into behaving like the flock of sheep that Huntford found them to be.

<sup>43</sup> Kate Teltscher has developed these concepts when dealing with British views of India. See Teltscher, Kate: *Inscribing India*. Delhi 1998.

<sup>44</sup> Sontag also noticed how the North was metaphorically coupled with old age and traditional inhibitions, while the South represented youth, energy, and jollity, still “Swedish youth, as in all the advanced countries now, is everywhere more ‘southern’ – more outgoing, expressive, emotional; less compulsive – than its elders”. Sontag 1969, as footnote 10, 26.

<sup>45</sup> See “An Interview with Susan Sontag”. In: *Boston Review*, June 1975 (<http://www.bostonreview.net/BR01.1/sontag.html>, December 2, 2008); Ruth, Arne: “The Second New Nation. The Mythology of Modern Sweden”. In: *Daedalus* 113 (1984:1), 53–96.

<sup>46</sup> Unlike the Russians, however, the Swedes also lacked contact with Eastern culture, isolated as they were, set on an peninsula which is “not so much a part of Europe as an extension of Siberia”. See Huntford 1971, as footnote 17, 14.

Huntford's account oscillated between an image of the Swedes as eternally submissive and a picture of Swedes of the past as a normal people just as anyone else. But his main point was clear: Whatever the Soviets had managed to do to the Russians – and were threatening to do to others under the banner of communism – Swedish elites had managed to sneak up on the Swedes in silence, under no particular banner at all, except for rationality and *Zeitgeist*.

This seemingly harmless combination of common sense (rationality?) and being up to date (modernity?) harboured within itself a very potent poison, which, Huntford warned, could very well spread elsewhere as well, even in staunchly anti-communist societies. It may be that Brits and Americans were culturally better equipped to withstand these “new totalitarians” than the culturally deficient Swedes. Nonetheless, the former already now harboured amongst themselves elites with just as ambitious plans for social conditioning of the population as did the Swedes. In fact, social changes under way seemed to make their job easier, as older people became progressively more and more alienated while younger people became more and more enthralled by hedonistic pop culture and compensatory, misguided radicalism, which was becoming gradually more and more compulsory in nature.

Huntford's brand of “septentrionalism” thus served a different purpose than did Sontag's, but it functioned in a similar way. Where Sontag saw the stifling cultural inhibitions of the North masquerading in a Western society, Huntford witnessed the political thought control of the East likewise peeping through. We have to ask ourselves what it is that makes the inner life of the Swedes so accessible to the American and to the Brit: The proximity (through modernity) allows for identification at the same time as it provides for a certain critical distance to the exotic “Other” under study, which in its turn allows for a critical gaze back upon the observing “Self.”

In other words, the “cultural compass” spun in new directions as Sontag's idealized South was poised against the North, and Huntford's West was pitted against the East. While Huntford's idealized average human is an Anglo-American, firmly rooted in market-oriented Western culture, Sontag's idols were to be found among the brave North Vietnamese fighting US imperialism or with the spontaneous Cubans, who are free to “freak out” whenever they want. Both these ideal figures stand in sharp contrast

to the inhibited and cold Swedish men and women Huntford and Sontag must have met while there, cold and hemmed in behind borders of their own making as they remained, despite all of their hot love and free sex.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> Like Sontag, Huntford suggested that this permanent depression would require a powerful inner revolution before it could be overcome. Today, young people in Sweden sometimes express opinions which seem to corroborate Huntford's opinion that sexuality might not always convey liberty, and that sexual liberalism may not always be an indicator of political and social empowerment. Today, however, it is not the "state" which is accused of inculcating a too sexualized view of humanity – and, by inference, a too objectified view of sexuality – on the Swedish people. Instead, it is the "market" – or, more ominously, the "internet" – which is considered to be largely responsible for this mechanization of sex – or perhaps objectification of individuals as objects of sex, as it would more commonly be understood today. While the modern conservative Huntford seems mostly to have been concerned with the *act* of sex and its *meaning*, the concern of contemporary post-modern radicals is rather with the *agents* of sex and their *identity*.