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# The end of Swedish exceptionalism? Citizenship, neoliberalism and the politics of exclusion

CARL-ULRIK SCHIERUP and ALEKSANDRA ÅLUND

*Abstract:* Sweden, where some 20 per cent of the population is either foreign born or second generation, has long been known internationally as the model of a tolerant, egalitarian, multicultural welfare state, which extended substantial citizenship, welfare and labour rights to all within its borders, including immigrants. However, under the twin pressures of neoliberalism and the EU's commitment to 'managed migration', this Swedish exceptionalism has been, and continues to be, substantially eroded. The shortcomings of the earlier multicultural settlement of the 1960s and 1970s, a growing extremist populism, the growth of an unprotected, semi-clandestine sector of the labour market, combined with high levels of youth unemployment and urban segregation, have led to unprecedented rioting and violence in Swedish cities. The voices of minority ethnic youth, many of them Muslim, should be heeded as rejecting the exclusivism of current political trends.

*Keywords:* assimilation, guest workers, Islamophobia, labour migration, managed migration, Muslims, Swedish Democrats, urban segregation, youth riots

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In the autumn of 2009, youth unrest ran like wildfire across the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of the Swedish cities of Malmö, Gothenburg and Uppsala. One of the latest in a series of urban rebellions (with early manifestations in Britain and the US in the 1980s), it was preceded most notably by the Paris insurrection of 2005 and the rebellions in Copenhagen and other Danish cities in 2008. As recently as 2005, in fact, Swedish integration policy was still being promoted as a positive model in the aftermath of the uprising in the socially deprived French *banlieues*. But the current state of the nation demonstrates that even Sweden, habitually renowned for its generous welfare policies and inclusive policies over asylum and multiculturalism, has eventually caught up with neoliberal globalisation and the related processes of segregation, racialised exclusion and poverty concentrated in the disadvantaged neighbourhoods of European and North American cities.

Violent 'street gangs' burning cars, setting schools and other institutions on fire, attacking police and fire fighters as well as other local agencies of the state, are certainly the instances of urban unrest most often reported on in the Swedish media. But they are just the more spectacular happenings in a continuous, low-scale rebellion arising from a multitude of alternative networks, social movements and voluntary associations. Some of them are more, some less politically profiled; some more, some less anti-racist, anti-fascist or anti-neoliberal; some more, some less militant. Some articulate themselves in clear ideological terms, reclaiming streets, cities and Sweden generally for a citizenry seen as falling victim to gentrification, escalating social inequality and injustice and unsettled by repressive policies of securitisation.

A common denominator of the distrust felt by this multitude can be summed up in the sardonic Swedish poly-ethnic youth argot for the police: '*Aina*'. Adopted from the Turkish expression '*Ainasiz*', meaning 'without a mirror', it implies 'those who should be ashamed of looking at themselves in a mirror' or 'those without shame'. The way in which the recent outbursts of frustration in Malmö and other Swedish cities were represented and acted upon by the media and government indicates that *Ainasiz* may convey a symbolic meaning addressed to a wider audience than the Swedish riot police; a Swedish polity that continues to emphasise the necessity of living up to the liberal 'core values' of democracy, equal opportunities and diversity, the actual illiberal policies of which, however, are, step by step, turning this society's comprehensive charter of citizenship and diversity into a dead letter.

Sweden is, in fact, one of the North Atlantic societies that has most immigrants and inhabitants of recent 'foreign background' in its population.<sup>1</sup> Those of foreign origin, together with second-generation Swedes, account for over 20 per cent of Sweden's total population; of these, more than half are from non-European backgrounds. But in the larger cities, the proportion of the population from immigrant backgrounds is considerably higher. Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden, has the highest proportion of such inhabitants. Here, two out of

five people were born abroad or have one or two parents who were born abroad, and half of all children under 5 speak a mother tongue other than Swedish.

In spite of extended processes of urban segregation, social exclusion and labour market discrimination,<sup>2</sup> until recently Sweden continued to be seen, from an international perspective, as the model of a tolerant and egalitarian multicultural welfare society, a kind of exceptionalist model for others to follow. It was a country that expressly aimed to merge extended rights of citizenship with a political framework free from essentialist conceptions of national belonging, through institutions geared towards this.<sup>3</sup> Its rules for, and practices of, family unification have long been, and indeed still are, liberal compared to those of most other European states. Conditions for obtaining full citizenship are equally liberal, reflected in the fact that the rate of naturalisation among immigrants and their children has consistently been among the highest in Europe, with almost two in every three foreign-born inhabitants holding full Swedish citizenship. Sweden is probably also the country in the North Atlantic region which has, until recently, demonstrated the largest degree of openness towards asylum seekers from areas of the world unsettled by authoritarian rule (e.g. Greece, Chile, Iran), ethnonational repression and cleavages (Palestine, South Africa, Turkey, former Yugoslavia), economic marginalisation and internecine conflict (Somalia) or imperial conquest, occupation and devastation (Iraq, Afghanistan).

To trace the background to the urban unrest and the tense political conjuncture in general, it is necessary to go back to the mid-1970s and the formulation of a Swedish politics on multicultural citizenship, its ambitious intentions, but also its innate paradoxes. Over the last two decades, this politics has been transformed as it has become increasingly embedded in a wider neoliberal trajectory. It is also necessary to look at the way in which the resultant urban unrest, and the conditions in which protesting youth live, have been represented in the mass media and in political discourse, with powerful political forces pressing for the introduction of a new and restrictive conditionality for accessing and retaining citizenship. What has transpired is that Sweden has aligned itself with common EU trends through an exclusionary policy of 'circular migration', breaking with decades of policy on migration and citizenship.

### **From multicultural citizenship to diversity management**

The fundamental features of Swedish integration policy were formulated in the 1960s and 1970s and amended and reformulated on the premise of a principled, liberal multicultural citizenship in 1975, when a progressive reform of policies on migration and migrant incorporation was passed through the Swedish parliament. Its slogan of 'equality, freedom of choice and partnership' boldly paraphrased the French revolution's *égalité, liberté, fraternité*. The reform was based on an equitable welfare system, a liberal universalist conception of citizenship that had social citizenship at its heart and an inclusive multicultural conception of the nation. In combination with a reform of the Swedish electoral system in

1976, it guaranteed, in terms of 'denizenship',<sup>4</sup> access to almost all established rights of civil, political and social citizenship, even for immigrant non-citizens. A generous asylum policy and permissive rules for family unification were backed by guarantees for fast naturalisation based on criteria of residence that were not restricted by language tests, oaths of allegiance, income criteria, and so on. The specific labour-capital compact on which the Swedish welfare state rested effectively blocked the use of migration as a vehicle for wage depreciation, serving at the same time as a guarantee of access to equal rights and a bulwark against discrimination and racial harassment.

In terms of the cultural rights of citizenship,<sup>5</sup> 'multiculturalism'<sup>6</sup> or 'liberal pluralism',<sup>7</sup> the decade following the reforms of the mid-1970s appeared golden indeed, marked as it was by a distancing from the policy of implicit assimilation of earlier years. The Swedish model appeared to be one of the most balanced political attempts to merge a liberal-universalist framework of citizenship with particular identity claims. The articulation of the principles on which the reform was based promised equal access to rights of citizenship on *formal* legal terms, together with preconditions for realising the exercise of a *substantial* citizenship through forms of involvement in civil society that respected and drew on the cultural and social resources of migrants.

Yet, the Swedish model of multicultural citizenship – or, more specifically, the way it was implemented through particular institutional practices and organisational strategies – was charged with potential tensions. And indeed, in our book *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism*,<sup>8</sup> published two decades ago, we discussed the looming dilemmas of this ambitious political programme. We pointed to the contradictions between the political rhetoric and an actually existing multiculturalism transformed, through corporatist institutional practices, into a bureaucratically managed 'tower of Babel': a nested hierarchy of ethnationally defined social collectivities that were monitored and depoliticised through a generous system of public support (but with many conditions attached) to 'migrant organisations', all inserted into a discriminatory and ethnically divided labour force. The egalitarian policies of the corporatist welfare compact, combined with a farsighted legislative and political approach to migration and new ethnic minorities' access to social, political and civil rights, certainly ensured relative social stability. But general welfare policies and an elaborate system of collective agreements between the social partners were, in themselves, neither an effective nor a sufficient guarantee against discrimination and social and political disadvantage.

We addressed, in particular, an essentialising and stereotyping *culturalism*, explaining and devising cures to all social problems in terms of 'culture', which was implemented through discriminatory institutional practices. This became more and more prominent, in line with the widening disjunctions in the 'Swedish model' of the welfare state in general and, from the mid-1980s, in particular, the increasing difficulty of incorporating a growing population of refugees from Asia and Africa into an ever more exclusivist labour market.<sup>9</sup> Members of

violent proto-Nazi grassroots movements burned down refugee camps across the country, and, in 1991, a populist party entitled New Democracy won seats in parliament on the basis of its tough-against-immigration-and-immigrants rhetoric. Several important mainstream political actors and civil servants struck a similar note, bringing Sweden into a situation such as that of the UK in the 1980s under Thatcherism.

While parts of the populist political programme were in fact adopted, in line with the gradual harmonisation of Sweden's migration policies with the EU, this incipient surge was effectively repressed in the 1990s by a realigned broad Left-Right political consensus. In the midst of a deep economic and social crisis, Sweden carried out a profound political-ideological review of its policies on migration and migrant incorporation.<sup>10</sup> A new *integration policy* was to replace the earlier *immigrant policy*. 'Diversity management', first branded for the development of public policy and corporate business in the US, became emblematic, even as 'multiculturalism' went out of fashion. A 1997 government proposition explicitly discarded the former focus on the rights and agency of culturally or ethnically defined groups. The refurbished integration policy was conceptualised as a policy targeted at the 'total population', based on an altered set-up of institutions in the labour market, the educational system, housing, health, culture, and so on.<sup>11</sup> The policy was meant to take into consideration all who suffered disadvantage due to their ethnic, cultural or religious background, and the struggle against discrimination, xenophobia and racism was given high priority. But all citizens and inhabitants were to be responsible for integration; it was not primarily understood as a question for immigrants or ethnic minorities, but as a policy targeted at the development of an integrated society as a whole. This was to include building a *new Swedish identity* and a *renegotiated national community* based on shared democratic values rather than common historical provenance.<sup>12</sup> In contrast with the corporatist spirit of the 1970s, the question of ethnic and cultural identity was now regarded as, first and foremost, a question for each individual.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of differences between the Left and Right concerning the exact interpretation of the new integration policy, there is an obvious convergence with the neoliberal turn in Swedish politics in general, in which the ruling 'third way' Social Democratic party elite is the driving force.<sup>14</sup> The merging of integration policy with new policies for economic growth and social inclusion through business-friendly policies is evident in a range of public reports. The buzzwords of the refurbished policies for integration are 'lifelong learning', 'employability' and 'ethnic entrepreneurship'. This has also influenced the perspective on migrant and ethnic minority associations.<sup>15</sup> Whereas, in theory at least, the idea in the mid-1970s had been to support migrant organisations as autonomous corporate actors in civil society,<sup>16</sup> the emphasis was now shifted towards prescribing their role as that of market-oriented stakeholders in employment projects and local and regional partnerships for growth.

At the same time, the political practice of the post-second world war Swedish welfare state, driven by an ideology of distributive justice and aspirations for



*equality of outcome*, now gave way (even within the domain of integration policy) to an ideology and institutional practice driven by market incentives that focused on *equal opportunities*.<sup>17</sup> The new integration policy also set out, in tandem with EU directives, to put the question of discrimination firmly on the agenda. The Swedish corporatist model, which had formed the wider context for the reforms of the 1970s, assumed that the general welfare policy, and the accord between unions and employers that guaranteed its validity, would, as such, function as a powerful counteracting force to disadvantage. Consequently, binding, sanction-based legal frameworks that focused on combating discrimination had long been deemed obsolete.<sup>18</sup> This proved highly unrealistic. Thus, the tightened legal framework for combating discrimination – harmonised with EU law and directives and with a strong affinity to US anti-discrimination law and practice – introduced around the turn of the millennium, represented an important *volte face* in Swedish policy.<sup>19</sup>

The new integration policy has supported the rise of an elite among citizens of foreign background to leading positions in business, public administration, politics, academia and the media. But the new directives were introduced alongside the gradual demise of the welfare state's protective framework of social citizenship.<sup>20</sup> Thus, given the concurrent neoliberal trend in economic policy, welfare and labour market regulation, anti-discrimination legislation and diversity management have come to operate in social circumstances that, step by step, are becoming increasingly similar to the structurally based forms of social polarisation, poverty and racialised exclusion that obtain in countries such as the US and the UK.<sup>21</sup>

Significant groups now find themselves not only outside the ordinary labour market, but also excluded from unemployment insurance. Given Sweden's traditional priority of implementing an active labour market policy and upgrading skills, the welfare regime was not geared to cope with large-scale and long-term unemployment.<sup>22</sup> The active labour market policy of the post-second world war era had been the baseline for decommodifying labour and the attempt to eliminate low-wage occupational ghettos. Its neoliberal character since 1990, reminiscent of US-style workfare,<sup>23</sup> has come to underpin the adaptation of a marginalised reserve army, exposed to the market-driven discipline of precarious low-wage niche employment. A growing number of migrants and minority ethnic Swedes have been pushed from the centre to the periphery of the welfare system, into a casualised labour market and a degraded informal sector.

The leading Conservative party (which dubbed itself 'Sweden's New Labour' during campaigning) has, since it came to power in 2006 as the leading party in a centre-right political bloc, put forward an even more root and branch workfare policy as its major political platform. Integral to this policy are stringent fiscal measures that have squeezed growing numbers of low-wage workers out of the unions. Further measures, forcing higher tariffs for unemployment insurance on workers in low-paid sectors of the labour market, combined with reduced health

insurance coverage, are likely to exacerbate these trends. Organised labour has seen its protective capacities significantly reduced in the current period, and migrants, as well as others outside the relatively protected core labour market, are feeling the consequences in terms of greater insecurity, the deterioration of employment conditions, the proliferation of precarious labour relations and social marginalisation.<sup>24</sup> To this can be added: an alarming rate of youth employment, concentrated, in particular, among youth of immigrant background; urban poverty and unrest, which expose the consequences of labour market marginalisation; and the shrinking of public services, particularly in education, in the disadvantaged districts of larger cities.

### **Stigmatised territories and marginalisation**

Thus, the interdependent processes – long debated – through which the labour and the housing markets have become racialised,<sup>25</sup> and in which social and structural constraints have taken on spatial and territorial forms, have come to fruition in Sweden.

The new suburban satellite towns, part of a huge municipal housing programme undertaken by social democratic governments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, have become notorious as sink areas. They were built in tandem with the fast industrial development, and internal and external migrations, of the welfare state's heyday some forty years ago. Old inner-city housing areas were cleared and rebuilt fit for business and gentrification. Immigrants and people on low incomes in general were directed to the new municipal suburban housing areas on the peripheries. But with the onset of the deep socioeconomic crisis of the early 1990s, reinforced by the neoliberal policies of the last two decades, these satellite towns have evolved into stigmatised territories, with a reputation for social problems and predominantly inhabited by the most disadvantaged of the ethnic minorities and a dwindling proportion of socially marginalised Swedish majority people. Hence, the adverse social consequences resulting from the transformation of the Swedish welfare state into a workfare state, a progressively more polarised dual labour market and racial discrimination, combined with the most rapid growth in social inequality in the OECD,<sup>26</sup> have all become concentrated in the poorer satellite towns of the larger cities. Here, living conditions are similar to those in a number of other European countries, not least France, where, in the words of Riva Kastoryano,<sup>27</sup> the urban multiethnic suburbs are places where otherness and poverty go together.

In these areas, the interplay between spatial segregation, marginalisation in the labour market and public stigmatisation seems to generate a vicious circle. The number of people between 18 and 64 years of age who receive long-term income support is much higher in these areas; between 8–21 per cent in 2006, compared to the Swedish average of 1.5 per cent.<sup>28</sup>

The social exclusion visited on immigrant parents tends to be transferred to their children,<sup>29</sup> a substantial proportion of whom grow up in poverty. In terms



of international comparisons, the Swedish child poverty rate – with 12 per cent of all children in 2006 living in families whose standard of living does not guarantee elementary needs – is not particularly high. But poverty is heavily concentrated in migrant and minority ethnic families in the major cities and in lone-parent families.<sup>30</sup> Thus, while almost one in three children of foreign background (two foreign-born parents) is likely to grow up in poverty, this is true for only one in sixteen children of Swedish background.<sup>31</sup> Almost every other child of a lone parent born abroad is likely to grow up in poverty.<sup>32</sup> In the city of Malmö, almost every third child grows up in poverty.<sup>33</sup> Examining the distribution of poverty *within* cities gives an even clearer idea of how critical the intersection of ethnicity, class, residential segregation and poverty is. Several satellite towns in Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö have child poverty rates above 40 per cent. All these high-poverty areas have a majority of families from a migrant background. The multiethnic satellite town of Rosengård in Malmö has the highest child poverty rate in the country, with more than two in every three children growing up below the poverty line. Here, four out of five inhabitants are of immigrant background and fewer than two out of five adults aged between 20 and 64 have a secure regular job; in some neighbourhoods, the figure is even lower. This is what lies behind low average incomes and high levels of dependency on welfare benefits and informal economic activities.<sup>34</sup>

Patterns of poverty and ethnic segregation correlate, in several aspects, with educational opportunities and achievement. In metropolitan Stockholm, for example, a pattern of spatially profiled correlations between educational opportunities, ethnicity, class and gender has been recorded that distinguishes the centre of the city from its multiethnic periphery.<sup>35</sup> In a recent report entitled *Young Today*, the National Board for Youth Affairs states that youth from a foreign background obtain poorer results in elementary school, leading to lower rates of participation in secondary education (76 per cent compared to 91 per cent for the host population) and, potentially, at university level.<sup>36</sup>

Young people living in areas of housing deprivation also experience considerably more difficulty in the labour market than other young people in Sweden in general, in both rates of employment as well as levels of education. Many are neither in education, nor in the formal labour market. Whereas this was the case for 14 per cent of Swedish majority people aged 20–25 in the country as a whole in 2006, in several deprived areas of Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö, the rate was double that or more. Among young people in the disadvantaged urban areas, unemployment and clandestine sources of income have reached critical levels. Although the comparability of national statistics can be difficult and controversial, it appears safe to conclude that the youth unemployment rate in Sweden is among the highest in the EU-15.<sup>37</sup> This could be due to its highly and increasingly polarised dual labour market, with high thresholds of entry into the protected primary tier. The rate of youth unemployment is far higher than for the same age groups in Denmark and the Netherlands, which have comparable welfare systems, and probably higher than the rate in the UK, which averages

the official unemployment rate for youth in the EU.<sup>38</sup> Among youth in disadvantaged urban areas, unemployment is considerably higher than the official average of 27 per cent for those aged between 20–25 (measured as those registered as jobseekers in employment offices). In certain disadvantaged areas of the city of Gothenburg, for example, the rate of youth unemployment approaches 40 per cent. Correspondingly, the *employment* rate for young people in deprived neighbourhoods is lower than the national average and between 20–30 per cent lower than in other parts of the major cities; it is lower for young women than young men and lowest for young people born in Africa and Western Asia.<sup>39</sup>

### **'Cultural deviancy', securitisation and moral improvement**

The multiethnic suburban areas of cities like Stockholm, Malmö, Gothenburg and Uppsala have, during the last two decades, become favourite targets for the media, which focus on social problems such as high unemployment, vandalism, criminality and welfare dependency. They have also become hotspots of urban unrest. Media coverage of the 2008–2009 youth riots in Swedish cities consistently alluded to contemporary war zones in Afghanistan, Gaza or Lebanon, occasionally interlaced with long-familiar references to urban ghettos in the US. Several reports did indeed convey a critical picture of police violence and brutality: 'Police attacks demonstrate a level of violence that is not supported in any legal provision. Cops appear to believe that they have been dropped into a war-zone in Gaza', one commentator asserted<sup>40</sup> about riots in Gottsunda in the administrative area of Uppsala (wittily redubbed 'Ghettosunda' for the purpose). Some reporters blame 'society' and 'politicians' for negligence, focusing on unemployment, welfare dependence, police harassment, the short termism of investments in projects aimed at combating social exclusion, and so on.<sup>41</sup> 'A sad picture of exclusion', another reporter called the situation in the Gothenburg suburb of Hjällbo. Here, more than one in three young people aged between 20–25 was 'outside the system'; not working, not studying and with only a few having access to social welfare benefits. A new 'underclass' was emerging in the poverty of suburbia. Youngsters are born in Sweden, but 'placed outside a society' that 'does not care a damn'.<sup>42</sup>

However, most media reports appear to draw less analytical conclusions. Obsessed with crime and violence among migrants, their dominant focus is on the spectacular and (allegedly) culturally related 'difference' and 'deviance'. Acts of violence among young people (who are usually characterised as 'immigrant youth', ignoring the composite character of the protests or the varied backgrounds of those involved) are seen as conditioned by their private family problems, most often explained as inherent to 'their culture'. This kind of interpretation of the problems related to social exclusion in the cities illustrates a more general tendency in the way in which such problems are represented in the public sphere, in the mass media and through institutional practices. It also indicates how 'moral panics'/public anxieties can become self-fulfilling

prophecies that create their own reality. The perceived problem of 'immigrant culture' is disconnected from social reality,<sup>43</sup> depicted as a monolithic entity collectively shared by ethnic groups or communities and exiled to the private family sphere. The stereotype of 'immigrant' gender relations, usually in the form of male oppression and female passivity, is created along the way.<sup>44</sup> 'Immigrant' or, increasingly, 'Muslim' culture becomes a smokescreen behind which the wider societal context remains concealed.

Just as the neoconservative 'moral underclass discourse',<sup>45</sup> familiar in the US and the UK, cites cultural 'deviancy', 'dysfunctional' families and 'deficient parenthood' as the root causes of a vicious circle of social exclusion and escalating violence, so the most common explanation for the recent youth riots was to blame parents for the difficult family conditions and inadequate socialisation of their children that forced young people onto the streets. At the same time, the burden of solving these general social problems is shifted on to the same parents and families who are to take responsibility for, and control of, their children so that they stay at home in the evening. This type of circular argument was, for example, well illustrated in a debate between youth, politicians and public celebrities on youth protests in Rosengård that was broadcast by the popular channel TV-4.<sup>46</sup> More militant interventions in the debate included the suggestion of a regular 'curfew' to keep young people in their homes at night and the setting up of a specialised national police force to bring order back to Rosengård, which would, at the same time, prevent violence and disorder from infecting the rest of Sweden.

However, the representation of the Swedish 'suburban problem' in terms of cultural deviancy is nothing new. It was integral to the looming 'new realism' of the late 1980s; the flipside of the emerging 'new racism', which, in *Paradoxes of Multiculturalism*,<sup>47</sup> we described as a potential graveyard for the liberal Swedish policy of multiculturalism. But the important difference, two decades later, is the tendency now to elevate this discourse to the status of political correctness and a tangible *realpolitik*, all in the name of 'liberal core values'.<sup>48</sup>

Problems connected with the concentration of recently arrived migrants (mainly asylum seekers) and disadvantaged ethnic minorities, combined with urban social segregation, have been noted as critical in several official state-sponsored investigations as well as in academic research.<sup>49</sup> These have long been a point of contention in politics, with parties on the Left and the Right blaming each other for having caused 'failed integration' and vying with each other to market solutions to the problem of the country's so-called 'exposed city districts'. While Left rhetoric tends to urge more public institutional involvement and state investment in the disadvantaged satellite towns, the political Right persistently blames the 'failure of integration' on the bureaucratic nanny state, which turns potentially resourceful new Swedish citizens into permanently passive and culturally deviant 'welfare clients'. For decades, the exploitation of the 'immigrant problem' in electoral campaigns had been played down in tribute to the overall Left-Right consensus in Swedish

politics.<sup>50</sup> However, this is now changing and Sweden appears, step by step, to be moving closer to the type of politics practised in neighbouring Denmark and in many other parts of Europe.

Largely thanks to its strategic development of a firm stand on the so-called question of integration, the Swedish Liberal party (Folkpartiet) was able to take command of the political agenda before the 2002 elections by focusing on 'demands on immigrants'. Subsequently, the party presented a series of reports entitled *Maps of Exclusion* (2004–2008), which contended that social exclusion in major cities had brought Sweden 'dangerously close to the point when ethnic and social conflicts may degenerate into open riots and other extremely tragic events'.<sup>51</sup> Half a million people were deemed to belong to the 'excluded', the majority of them 'immigrants', of whom three in five came 'from outside Europe', living in areas marked by high levels of unemployment and crime.<sup>52</sup> The 2008 report,<sup>53</sup> published when the Liberal party was in the ruling centre-right coalition, claimed that the number of 'exposed' big city areas had grown dramatically from three in 1990 to 156 in 2008, a period during which the Social Democrats were in government most of the time.

The reports do emphasise the importance of high levels of unemployment and dependency on welfare benefits, but allegedly dysfunctional lifestyles and deviant values are underlined as a root cause of the overall state of misery, with the cultural frames of reference of the excluded seen as causal in their own right.<sup>54</sup> In effect, as Meijling argues<sup>55</sup> in a critical appraisal of the report, this 'cartography of residential segregation' virtually 'produces' the 'excluded' by using measurements and criteria that lack any scientific basis. Residents are linked with geographical areas, but the marginalisation of these areas is disconnected from wider structures and processes in society. The reports thereby fuel the idea that 'deviance' is spreading of its own accord in an 'uncontrolled manner'.<sup>56</sup>

In order to fix what is perceived as an 'uncontrolled' proliferation of exclusion, a motley series of measures have been put on the political agenda. They merge neoliberal nostrums for social inclusion through growth with punitive surveillance, counter-insurgency and conservative concerns for reaffirming moral values.

One measure taken by the centre-right government, after ousting the Social Democrats from power in autumn 2006, was to engage researchers from the Centre for Asymmetric Threat and Terrorism Studies at the National Defence College to investigate the problems of 'fundamentalism'. The specific target was the multiethnic neighbourhood of Rosengård in Malmö, seen as one of the most problematic and highlighted in the *Maps of Exclusion*. In January 2009, the centre's report,<sup>57</sup> which has been heavily criticised for its lack of scientific validity, was presented to the public and endorsed by the minister for integration.

The report, which is based on interviews with a limited number of local professional staff 'engaged in school, social services and police', depicts the

emergence of an alarming and growing 'culture of threat' (*hotkultur*) challenging Swedish democratic values in a local community that is becoming permanently 'isolated from the rest of society'. A similar trend is said to prevail in other parts of the city. The cultural fundamentalism of the (immigrant) residents forces young women to dress traditionally, it maintains, and the presence of Islamist parties propels anti-democratic movements and violent radicalisation.<sup>58</sup>

The incipient strategy, a type of counter-insurgency through 'intercultural dialogue', is matched by a political programme for the resocialisation, redemption even, of the 'excluded', aimed at shaping or reshaping their mindset, 'culture' and social being. During 2008, following an EU initiative, the government began promoting a dialogue on 'core values' that was supposed to continue until 2011.<sup>59</sup> Swedish government documents contributing to the dialogue<sup>60</sup> repeatedly betray a profound ambivalence that echoes contemporaneous discourses in the UK, the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe. Proclamations of the need for combining unity (core values) and (cultural) diversity end up, more or less directly, arguing for unity in terms of cultural assimilation rather than for cultural plurality backed by equity or equality.<sup>61</sup> In this vein, Minister for Integration Nyamko Sabuni focused on 'strengthening respect for democracy and the fundamental human rights' that are inherent in Swedish liberal core values. Due to the consequences of contemporary migration and ethnic diversity, Sabuni concluded, there is an urgent need for intensified work on integration around these values.<sup>62</sup> In order to secure social cohesion, a shared vision and sense of belonging must be extended to those who live 'outside society', those new generations of 'strangers' who have ever-fewer shared values and contacts with 'society' than did their parents.

Thus, in 2008, the year of multicultural dialogue in the EU, Sabuni's argument represented another political contribution to the construction of 'the stranger' or, rather, the estrangement of the culturally different Other.

### **Erosion of citizenship**

We have described the winding track traversed by Sweden over the past three decades. Our point of departure was a liberal multiculturalism that offered an extended and substantial body of citizenship rights – civil, political, cultural, social and labour rights – to 'newcomers' and which had long been coupled with an enlightened asylum policy. However, the last two decades have, step by step, led towards neoliberal disciplinary strategies, neoconservative moral reaffirmation and the erosion of a comprehensive citizenship pact. Seen in historical perspective, the riots of 2008–2009 appear to signify a breaking point, as it were, a probable beginning of the end of Swedish exceptionalism.

In the US, the Los Angeles insurrection of 1992 was accompanied by regressive authoritarian measures in which 'Lock Down America's' stunning incarceration rate was one of the most conspicuous instruments,<sup>63</sup> alongside the introduction of repressive workfare policies.<sup>64</sup> In the UK, riots such as those in Bradford,



Oldham and Burnley in 2001, were the pretext for introducing discriminatory citizenship tests.<sup>65</sup> Late-coming unrest in Swedish satellite towns has been met with surveillance measures for controlling so-called 'extremism'. Under the banner of allegedly liberal 'core values', this formerly neutral country has adopted the credo of the 'global war on terror' as an integral element of its policies for fixing 'failed neighbourhoods'<sup>66</sup> on the domestic front. The ongoing dismantling of the welfare state and repressive workfare policies continue to exacerbate racialised inequality, social exclusion and frustration among young people in deprived urban areas. At the same time, a surge of xenophobia and Islamophobia is being activated in a populist backlash that may end up by bringing Sweden into line with the retrograde policies of the Netherlands, Switzerland or neighbouring Denmark, although, so far, this remains to be seen.

Beyond EU declarations and directives on tolerance, diversity and policies against discrimination and racism, illiberal ideologies, political movements and power blocks are building up across Europe configured around 'integralist'<sup>67</sup> philosophies that evoke 'nation', 'community', 'culture', religion, 'colour', 'blood' or 'descent' as the essentialist factors binding society. In some cases, such as those of France, Denmark or Austria, the metamorphosis of so-called 'tolerant' societies has for some time been the subject of attention in the media, politics and social science. In other cases, a seemingly sudden transmutation has taken many by surprise, as when, during a short span of time, the Netherlands' 'liberal' and 'tolerant' society was observed to 'go to the other extreme and demand conformity, compulsion and seemingly undemocratic sanctions against immigrants'.<sup>68</sup> In the cases of Britain and Sweden, current developments appear more convoluted and ambivalent than in most other parts of Europe. Here, 'diversity' continues to be highly praised as a resource for economic growth and prosperity, and explicitly xenophobic populist parties are shunned by mainstream politics. However, 'cultural difference' tends, at the same time, to be branded as 'an excess of alterity'<sup>69</sup> that needs to be controlled through assimilationist policies, citizenship tests, police action and biopolitical counter-insurgency strategies to control the populations under review, albeit under the rubric of democracy and human rights.

We see the discourses that preceded and responded to the recent urban riots in Sweden as a litmus test that shows the country how far it has wandered on this obscure track. These discourses range from blatantly xenophobic and racist statements to discrete and sometimes almost imperceptible reformulations in government reports. Violent neo-Nazi street-level racism has receded, but has given way to a new, increasingly influential ethnocentric, xenophobic and nationalist populism. As a latecomer to the growing European family of radically xenophobic populist parties, the so-called Swedish Democrats succeeded in entering parliament in 2010 with 6 per cent of the total vote and the potential to hold the balance of power between the ruling centre-right alliance and a Left and green political opposition. The party's historical roots are in the old Swedish National Socialist movement of the 1930s and the explicitly neo-Nazi movement



of the 1980s. It has, however, worked assiduously to cleanse its image of such embarrassing historical blemishes and, like other nationalist-populist parties across Europe, has managed with some success to wash away the stigma of being 'racist'. Over the past decade, the party has built up a solid network of grassroots groups throughout local communities.

Unlike in neighbouring Denmark, no alliance has been forged between any of the established parties and the national populists. On the contrary, the Swedish Democrats have been openly condemned by the Right as well as the Left. Nonetheless, the established parties have tended to co-opt the Democrats' message in a stiffening competition for the hearts and votes of the 'genuine' or 'authentic people'.<sup>70</sup>

Take, for example, the proposal to amend Sweden's policies of integration elaborated by the largest and most influential party in the ruling centre-right coalition, entitled *Keys to Sweden and Swedish Society*.<sup>71</sup> The proposal, characterised by its restrictive nature, is directed at the 'newly arrived', in particular, and 'immigrants', in general, and is strikingly reminiscent of the arguments for citizenship tests in the UK. A special contract, it argues, should be established between the 'newly arrived' and the state. The expectations and duties stipulated for each party to such a contract evoke the current workfare orientation of Swedish public policy and are phrased in language that strongly recalls the 'moral underclass discourse' identified by Ruth Levitas in the UK and the US.<sup>72</sup> The proposal's point of departure is what it describes as a 'welfare dependency that tends to be inherited across generations of immigrants', which, it claims, is particularly characteristic of multiethnic suburban areas where youth are brought up by social outsiders to reject Swedish society, its laws and norms. Given such a background, the conditions upon which immigrants obtain Swedish citizenship are to be tightened.<sup>73</sup> Moreover, the working group concludes, 'citizenship received on false grounds can be withdrawn' in the case of criminal behaviour.<sup>74</sup> No doubt remains as to the importance of making it clear to immigrants that, in Sweden, Swedish values are crucial. 'Citizenship in Sweden should not be watered down':<sup>75</sup> a far cry from one of the basic principles of decades of Swedish policy underscoring that citizenship unconditionally follows from residence<sup>76</sup> without reference to 'cultural competence', citizenship or language tests or demands for allegiance or value conformity. So far, this has not resulted in any new legislation or formal measures, but it does illustrate a change in mainstream political discourse.

A new law on 'labour immigration' was, however, passed through parliament in 2008,<sup>77</sup> which provides another, more tangible example of the erosion of citizenship. The new law paved the way for a temporary migrant workers' scheme, even in Sweden. It has been described as 'a slight revolution'<sup>78</sup> in a country hitherto buttressed by a longstanding, substantial edifice of citizenship that is perhaps more inclusive than anywhere else<sup>79</sup> and where schemes for temporary labour migration have consistently been rejected as against the principles of liberal democracy and its canonisation of labour rights, social rights

and political rights as basic rights. In connection with the new law, trade unions and Left parties voiced fears that the dependency of migrant workers on a single employer that it imposed would lead to their being placed in an exceedingly weak bargaining position, exposed to excessive exploitation,<sup>80</sup> a seemingly well-grounded fear.<sup>81</sup>

The law represents a qualitative break with the inclusive regulatory and citizenship policies over immigrant labour, premised on union power and the expectation of full employment. This affirmation of union power in a strongly regulated labour market has, for almost four decades, blocked (apart from a few exceptional cases, such as seasonal workers, limited recruitment to occupations with a documented shortage of skilled labour, and so on) almost all direct importation of labour from third countries. But, under the *insignia* of 'human rights' and 'international solidarity', this has been matched by the upholding of one of Europe's most enlightened asylum policies. The latter indicates a Swedish exceptionalism that has largely prevailed until the present. Until recently, this has been manifested in, among other things, the relatively high rate of asylum granted to refugees from Somalia, Iraq and Afghanistan, compared to other 'western' nations.

While, in practice, any recruitment of foreign labour from third countries previously needed agreement by the trade unions, the unions' role is, under the new law, reduced to that of toothless consultation. The authority to process cases involving residence and work permits has been transferred from the Swedish public labour market authorities, which undertook detailed structural inquiries, through to the rapid, far less probing management of the Swedish Migration Board. Permits are granted on the principle that it is the individual 'employer's assessment of the need to recruit [labour] from a third country that must be the basis for the administration of matters of residence and employment permits'.<sup>82</sup> The conditions are both proper adherence to the prevailing labour market regulations and that the unfilled posts have previously been announced as vacant in Sweden, in the EU/EES area and Switzerland.

The law's purpose, it is claimed, is for Sweden to move towards equalising its rules for the employment of third-country nationals with those pertaining to EU/EES non-Swedish nationals and Swiss citizens. However, this contention appears open to question. The law appears to be more instrumental in harmonising Swedish management of migration in line with the temporary-worker systems currently developing across most of the rest of Europe. It introduces the possibility of the potentially large-scale importation of labour from 'third countries' on the basis of temporary employment contracts, and, in contrast to earlier practice in Swedish immigration policy, provides a legal-institutional framework for extending migrants' temporary residence on the grounds of employment to longer periods. While any employment of more substantial duration used to provide the basis for being granted a permanent residence permit and denizenship, including access to full social citizenship (inclusion in the provisions of the social security system), this is not the case with the new law. The duration

of a residence permit is dependent on the duration of a valid employment contract. The residence permit is, in principle, terminated when the employment contract is terminated. An initial employment contract can last for up to two years, with the possibility of subsequent temporary renewals up to a total of four years. During the first two years, the contracted migrant worker is bound to a single employer *and* to a certain limited section of the labour market. During possible further temporary employment contracts, the migrant is only bound to a certain section of the labour market, not to a single employer, but her/his residence permit is still dependent upon a valid employment contract. After four years, the migrant *can* be considered for full citizenship conditional upon being able to demonstrate a continuous employment record.<sup>83</sup>

The law on importing migrant labour consequently opens up a *third tier* of access to rights of citizenship, alongside the previously dominant dual statuses of *citizens* and *denizens*. Through its strict insistence on making residence dependent on employment status, the law, in effect, extends consecutive Swedish governments' ever-more uncompromising insistence on a disciplinary *workfare* regime,<sup>84</sup> but shifts access to rights and entitlements from the realm of social policy and integration policy to the realm of immigration control. Given current government efforts to reformulate the conditions of access to or retention of citizenship, the formal opportunity promised to migrant workers to opt eventually for full citizenship may turn into a cloak for actual practices preventing their substantial realisation, thus forging a covert alignment of Sweden with emerging all-European practices on 'managed migration'.<sup>85</sup> However, harmonisation appears to proceed even in other realms of Swedish migration policy. Thus, the launch of new legislation on the importation of labour, forged through the political process beyond any broad parliamentary consensus,<sup>86</sup> is packaged together with Sweden's eventual alignment with the EU's restrictive and convoluted refugee and asylum rules and policies.<sup>87</sup> In this way, Sweden is becoming a fully integrated (and complicit) member of the EU's 'Area of Freedom, Security and Justice'.

Thus, as the final irony, joining the 'Stockholm Programme', within which so-called 'circular migration' is the centrepiece of an integrated EU strategy for 'managed migration', appears to seal the end of Sweden's former exceptionalism.<sup>88</sup> 'Circular migration' is, too, a pragmatic solution for Sweden. In line with current policies across the EU, it promises politicians an escape from the horns of the political dilemma, between appeasing the populist surge by professing 'zero migration' and the need to respond to pressure from business and public services for continued cheap (and today often undocumented) migrant labour.<sup>89</sup> Such politicians can be economical with the truth in their constituencies, and, under cover of the EU's overall programme for 'managed migration', continue to remould Sweden's cumbersome 'problems' of asylum and 'illegal immigration' into a new, business-friendly 'guest worker' system.<sup>90</sup> This holds out the promise of a panacea by maintaining a continuous global labour supply to a hyper-flexible labour market while, at the same time, buying off extremist populism. The new labour migrants are, moreover, excluded from the edifice of

citizenship, the most important bulwark of Swedish exceptionalism. Thus, they are potentially muted and effectively barred from participating in labour conflicts and wider political struggles.

It is against the background of these, and a multitude of other related current political processes that are eroding citizenship for all, that minority ethnic youth's appeal to *reclaim Sweden* should be read as a message to wider society beyond the boundaries of their disadvantaged urban neighbourhoods.

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