

Social Mobility and National Character

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National character is seen here as the competence people develop in the encounter with social conditions. Using “typically Swedish” characteristics as described by Gustav Sundbårg and Åke Daun – extrospection, starchiness, efficiency, avoiding conflicts – I describe the conditions that encourage such attitudes. The basic assumption is that they characterize people with easy social mobility: only a fifth of Sweden’s educated and professional class comes from homes with an academic tradition. Pictures of the national character are painted by this group. Many academics come from the conscientious working class or from lower-middle-class families striving to climb; they have been active in associations and popular movements. They have sought to prove their capability, defining themselves in relation to their work, and displaying few striking personal or cultural traits. This gave them a place in hierarchical structures of the expansive public and private sectors. The capability strategy is discussed in Ulf Hannerz’s dichotomy of *perspective* and *message*. The empirical material comes from interviews and memoirs.

Today there are signs that the features of the starchy Swede are being replaced by flashier personal and cultural traits, at least in the educated class. Capability no longer ensures success. I suggest that this is due to the narrowing of the influx to universities and the availability of alternative careers outside the hierarchical orders.

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In ethnological research into nationality there is a troublesome vacuum – the link between social mobility and national character. How is consciousness formed in people who are moving upwards in the social structures? What kinds of national self-understanding develop in countries where people stick to their roots compared with countries where they have to break away?¹

In sociology and demography, however, social mobility is a well-established area of research. There have been studies of the opportunities for mobility, of career paths, of open and closed societies, of the influence of mobility on class consciousness and professional identity, and so forth.² The linking factors that are put forward concern the conditions of groups and classes, but rarely the more general question of how mobility may be related to a distinctive national character.

With examples from twentieth-century Sweden I shall discuss here the connection between the sort of characteristics that are considered “typically Swedish” – above all the stiff Swedish formality – and the attitudes which can be appropriate in a socially mobile society.

Swedishness as competence

It is of course risky to make general descriptions of a nation’s characteristics – there are horrifying examples to deter us, and scholars who repudiate such descriptions tend to be more numerous than those who attempt them. Whereas national *culture* is a legitimate research field, people’s identity character is a more dubious area. Scholars in recent years have delighted in discussing European civiliza-

tion processes, what different class cultures do to people's subjectivity, and so on. The purpose has been to use historical and cross-cultural comparisons to relativize our almost axiomatic notions about the delimited individual personality; this is something that is created and changed, nothing that *is*, something that arises in a context and is reformed when the context changes. The concept of identity is problematic to handle, since it claims to describe more than segments of a person's competence; it seeks to capture the totality. And it is hard to capture the varied possibilities in a formula. The very obsession with what is personal and individual can be seen as one of the most distinctive features in the ideology of the late twentieth century (cf. Marcus & Fischer 1986: 45–76).

What is called Swedishness differs from one time to another, from the senior civil servant to the lumberjack, from Västerbotten in the north to Skåne in the south. National individuality tends to evade anyone who attempts a scientific description.

At the same time, it is evident that there are certain basic features in, say, Swedishness or Hungarianness which are transmitted from generation to generation, a distinctiveness which is not effaced even in this age of communication and migration. This entices researchers to try ever more refined methods of investigation, from surveys to psychological tests, to find new ways to measure these nationally coloured peculiarities (see Daun's paper in this volume).

As an alternative to trying to capture *identity*, the researcher can look for the distinctive *skills* that people need in a particular country. Hungary and Sweden provide certain external conditions which form the basis of nationality. The "typically Swedish" properties would then be the strategies people have used in order to manoeuvre in Swedish society, as individuals learn to master their own society's game.

This view offers a dynamic way to approach the question of the national character. Instead of being a certain identity, it becomes a learned disposition, competence, or skill. This is a situational skill, but it really does need the right situation if it is to be displayed. The focus is

thus not on psychodynamic processes creating a certain personality or individual identity, but rather on external circumstances which demand specific patterns of adaptation. Swedishness is then the answer to the question "How can one get by in Sweden"? Changing external circumstances produce different definitions of what is typically Swedish.

Like any skill, the national character is something that is generally learned unconsciously. It is drilled in through many everyday encounters with people and things, engrained like manual dexterity and habits. It is only when it is contrasted with other realities that it is clearly revealed. Swedishness in America, for instance, has no more than a superficial resemblance to present-day Swedish traits in the old country, precisely because conditions in the new world are so different (Klein 1988). Ethnic identity is not a package that the immigrant brings with him from his homeland; it must be anchored in the current flow of everyday events if it is to survive. In a similar way, the ethnicity of immigrants to Sweden becomes, as Billy Ehn and others have shown, a negotiable commodity, a compromise arising out of the confrontation with Swedish society (Ehn 1988). The host country, not the country of origin, determines the framework for the choice of national characteristics.

It will be seen that I assume that some of the skills which are part of Swedishness are connected to the ease of movement within society, of pursuing a career which takes the individual to places his parents never saw. These are features developed in contexts where people are forced to be highly flexible in their close personal relations.

The Swedish temperament

That social mobility is one cornerstone of the Swedish temperament is evident from the statistician Gustav Sundbärg's description early this century. He drew attention to the way Swedes were turned outwards, not in the sense of being extroverted, but *extrospective*. The opposite of this was the introspection of the thoughtful, reflective type of person. Whereas Danes – Sundbärg's constant object of compar-

ison – were good psychologists and judges of human character, with a mastery of words, Swedes were geared to actions and outward-looking utility. Swedes built machines, educated the people, administered justice, and organized an efficient civil service. They also retained the virtues of the previous two centuries, when Sweden was a great power. Sundbärg's Swedes belong to a martial nobility devoted to doing good outside the nation's boundaries and outside themselves. A Swede is ever attended by a sense of duty, "a splendid fighter, a law-abiding citizen, a good husband, a humane master, and a dexterous worker – when he wants to be" (Sundbärg 1911: 16). The author implies that the latter reservation is unfortunate, since the qualities required of people at the turn of the century were bourgeois virtues like control and prudence, the force of argument rather than the argument of force. But the Swede was by nature naïve, and for his noble goals he fought fairly in a world that demanded cunning and introspective calculation.

When Sundbärg called the Swede long-sighted he meant precisely this transcendental attitude: Swedes had a blurred vision of close-up things, whereas Danes were short-sighted and ceremonious, obsessed with everyday concerns and plans.

The idea of extrospection also prompts Sundbärg to note that Swedes mostly view the outer person. They do not mix with people from other classes, which he explains as a lack of interest in what is human. They were instead careful to heed all the dictates of propriety, afraid of making fools of themselves, always obedient to directives and decrees from higher authorities. Since external signs were important – they showed one's place in the system – people were anxious that no one should have more than his due. Envy and the prohibition mentality – the Swede's pet vices – result from this attitude.

It can be said that Gustav Sundbärg was describing a well-educated person moving in hierarchical structures. The turn-of-the-century Swede advanced along the corridors of officialdom, shouted commands in the army, or planned the course of railway lines straight as an arrow through farming land. Although

Sundbärg's study of the national temperament was a supplement to the Inquiry into Emigration, it was scarcely the cosmology and culture of the masses that the author was most familiar with. The Swedish extrospection was an excellent strategy for men in the service of the state, holding office or enjoying positions of trust, aiming for promotion and a career within a given system. The vertical bonds to a strong central government and the will to serve furthered precisely the attitudes Sundbärg chose to see as essential features of the Swedish character. Danishness, by contrast, was nourished by a more pronounced bourgeois society with strong horizontal relations.

Sundbärg, who made no claims to scientific stringency, was bold in his historical conclusions. His essay on the national temperament was part of a national rhetoric which sought to explain how splendid Sweden really was. As the source of the Swedish national temperament Sundbärg invoked the historic freedom of the peasant; he claimed that Swedish extrospection was due to the freedom of the Swedish people to form their distinctive personality without pressure from outside. "The great psychologists of our time are the Russians, as a result of centuries of physical and mental oppression, which we cannot imagine" (Sundbärg 1911: 16). And why not look at the Danes, with their serfdom and bondage, struggles with Germany, and so on! But Sweden has never been occupied by foreign powers, has escaped the European experience of "the oppression of one social class by another", and the individual has had comparatively great political freedom *vis-à-vis* the governing power.

Sundbärg concludes his explanation of the national character by asserting that Swedish society has permitted mobility between the social classes. Although one may question the historical accuracy of this idealized description, Sundbärg the statistician knew what he was talking about as regards mobility.

The typical Swede

When the ethnologist Åke Daun describes present-day Swedes in the well-ordered welfare

state, there are both parallels and differences to Sundbärg's picture. Shyness and diffidence are still prominent characteristics. Swedes still appear to be extrospective in the sense that they feel more at home in what they do than what they are, more geared to accomplishing something in this world than to being with their fellow human beings. A Swede becomes someone by achieving something.

It can even be hard to catch sight of a Swede; the description is of a person who is "ordinary" in the extreme and clumsy at handling inter-personal conflicts. Whereas members of other nations display the gaudy feathers of their prominent characteristics, a Swede appears in his everyday grey costume, avoiding all embarrassing attention. He has important things to accomplish and is upset if he cannot devote himself to technical or organizational tasks, which he carries out earnestly and honestly. Only if he has a few drinks does he break the silence, but even then he is not particularly eloquent – the laconism is too deep-rooted. He believes strongly in outer forms (Daun 1986).

Daun's portrait of what is "typically Swedish" is based on penetrating and wide-ranging tests of social psychology. Contrasted with the Finnish and Japanese character, it reveals a fundamental Swedish personality type (Daun 1988; Daun *et al.* 1988). Whereas Sundbärg makes broad generalizations about the reasons, Daun aims for precision in the description of the personality.

Is the similarity of the two descriptions due to the handing down of 'Swedishness' from generation to generation, from the turn of the century to the present day, or is the continuity ensured by correspondences in the conditions? Does the character of today's Swede also reveal the societal framework of the welfare state?

Yes, possibly, if the description is socially restricted. Perhaps the features which Daun has emphasized should be seen as strategies which have been applicable in a certain societal situation – one with great chances of advancement in a growing public or private sector, where the jobs require qualities like flexibility and adaptability, careful regard to the demands of the situation and the superiors. One's own personal profile must be played

down, since this would only be an obstacle in one's career.

The portrait thus corresponds nicely with today's flexible social engineers pursuing their careers. They have adopted the attitudes that go with the job, just as Gustav Sundbärg's stiff-necked officials were well fitted to the demands of their hierarchical structures. Sundbärg's Sweden required different strategies from the welfare state. Yet both reveal a dependence on the system and obedience to its commands, and both exist in contexts allowing high mobility.

Today Sweden is said to have the highest social mobility of any country in Europe. Statistics tell us that "a majority of the Swedish population has changed class affiliation between childhood and adulthood" (Vogel 1987).³ This is not only typical of the last few decades, but also of the entire twentieth century.

Most of those who are counted as the educated middle class are social climbers who have left their origin and been acculturated to new contexts. About 30 per cent of today's upper middle class – senior officials in the public and private sectors – grew up in working-class homes, and 25 per cent of them come from the lower middle class. Although the majority of university graduates' children also follow the path of learning, these today make up only 17 per cent of the senior officials. The educated class is thus by far the most heterogeneous stratum in society as regards origin (Vogel 1987: 109–119).

The nationality of the educated class

For the past few years I have been working on a project focusing on the culture borne by the educated groups in twentieth-century Sweden.⁴ The empirical and theoretical discussion is based on the conditions applying to these people. The primary material of the research project consists of life-history interviews and memoirs. The temporal focus is on the first half of the century. Most of the people interviewed are between 60 and 70, with a contrasting group consisting of a younger generation born in the 1940s.

The overriding question of mobility and national character is narrowly restricted here in

terms of time and social class. By concentrating on this particular group we can question whether what we call national culture is anything more than plain and simple self-understanding. We can then focus our attention on the main question: How is this self-understanding shaped by the experiences of a person changing class?

Any discussion of national character in the twentieth-century world must take into consideration the attitudes of the educated. "Who builds a national culture, who constructs a national history, a national symbolic world?" is Orvar Löfgren's rhetorical question (1985); his answer invokes the American anthropologist Benedict Anderson, who points out that the vision of the beloved native land has been conjured up by educated people, intellectuals in a broad sense. They have needed an *imaginary* society to work for, something to give purpose and meaning to their own contribution. They have not worked for their own good, nor for their class or their family – it has been the nation and the people that have given legitimacy to work that has claimed to be altruistic (Anderson 1983). The distinctive national features have thus been fostered by people who needed not only a mythical charter for their projects but also one that was of use to them in their own career.

They have had exceptionally good opportunities to disseminate their own view of what was distinctively national. They administer the economic, political, and reproductive power; they also have access to the public sphere and are visible in the mass media. It is obvious that it is this group which has created stereotypes such as "the starchy Swede". The group is certainly not homogeneous, ridden as it is by ideological, cultural, and generation conflicts, and this is also reflected in the hesitation about what should be defined as distinctively national.⁵ What is typically Swedish is often presented as a caricature of what they actually do not wish to be identified with.

Perspectives and messages

How should the cultural analyst approach the effect of frequent upward mobility on national character? And what does it mean that many of the educated and those who mould public opinion are social climbers, or as I prefer to call them, class travellers. It may here bring greater clarity if we think in terms of the dichotomy of *communication* and *experience*, which is adopted from the anthropologist Ulf Hannerz's discussion (1982) of the two ways in which consciousness is built up.

On one hand, the individual acquires "on his own a sort of personal experience... from his specific place in the social structure." As child or adult, as man or woman, as worker or director, we have differing experiences. The individual interprets his circumstances, tries to understand them, creates fantasies and dreams on the basis of his personal experience. His place in the social structure gives class consciousness and ideologies, conditioning life-forms and habits. This socially acquired knowledge Hannerz calls *perspective*.

He uses the term *message* to describe the other source, symbolic communication. "The individual gets second-hand experiences from one or more members of society, or ready-made ideas of other kinds" (Hannerz 1982: 58). This includes messages from the school teacher, from the mass media and advertising hoardings, from friends and parents, from "popular culture" and "high culture". The messages are the "culture" of a society, while the perspectives are the citizens' experiences.

The messages are the centre of ethnological attention in the analysis of the symbolic sides of peasant society – myths, tales, and other folklore – whereas perspectives are seen more in the study of everyday material and social conditions. In modern society, an increasingly differentiated social structure tends to fragment people's experiences, whereas the rich flow of cultural communication has an integrating effect.

When messages are received by people with their individual perspectives, there takes place that interpretation which we can call their culture, in the scientific sense of subculture. Peo-

ple with similar social experiences tend to pick up similar messages. That they do *not* do so is the very foundation of ethnological and anthropological research. Otherwise it could be claimed that culture was nothing more than a mechanical superstructure based on social and material conditions. A place in the social structure does not automatically determine one's consciousness, and the fact that one belongs to a certain social category does not mean that one acquires a specific culture or can count on really belonging to any group.

When individuals do constitute a group, a gang or a society, a seedbed is created for intensive communication and thus for the *re-working* which we call a subculture, with the rules and symbols which emerge.

Typical of social climbers is that they appear to develop shared perspectives as a result of their coming from humble backgrounds and pursuing a career. They are in a corresponding way open to messages that show strong agreement. On the other hand, they rarely constitute a subculture. They are incorporated into ready-made contexts which they will in turn influence, but perspectives and messages will not coincide and make it possible to articulate a distinct culture. In other words, there is a greater probability that they will become Sundbärg's extrospective Swedes or Daun's starchy Swedes. They develop skills in handling the chances offered them by the system, but they are not so inclined to relax and cultivate their new garden.

The capability syndrome

In scholarly literature about the open society there is an assumption that society's élite stratum should be homogeneous because everyone there has undergone the same socialization. The members have shared memories from school and university, shared frames of reference, and their systems of values therefore tend to agree.⁶ When intellectuals are described as "the new class", this refers to the way that education can make different people the same, and to the influence of the profession on the individual.⁷

This assumption is contrary to what was said earlier about how consciousness is formed. For the reasoning to be valid, the educated must also come from uniform home backgrounds. Yet we have seen that people in this social category have different experiences which make them interpret messages differently.

– Education *does* different things to different people. What for some people is a reinforcement of impressions from home is for other people a schooling in social rootlessness. When the boy from a working-class home and the doctor's son stand together on the high-school steps on graduation day to be acclaimed by their parents, they have not only gone to different schools, but will also go home to different graduation parties.

School is part of a protracted passage rite in which pupils from the working-class must gradually learn the rules of the game: education *and* change of culture. The passage rite is intended to rub off a previous identity and teaching is a part of this important retraining process. Perhaps we can, with Vincent Crapanzano (1980), compare the passage rite to an introduction to a long period of anxiety, the aim of which is to put the individual in a state which makes him orient himself towards the goals that have been set up.

Or to use Hannerz's conceptual dichotomy: one stands to gain by denying one's own *perspective* and accepting the *messages* that are communicated. The working-class youth must actively acquire what he does not passively receive in everyday life from his parents and friends (cf. Lopareto & Hazelrigg 1975). School and knowledge provide an admission ticket to another world.

When we speak of "unequal recruitment to higher education" – the fact that two out of three children of academically educated parents also go to university, whereas only one working-class child in seven does so – we have a demonstration in statistical form of what it costs to reject everyday life, to leave the familiar perspectives and put one's faith in the school's message. Everybody has the same chance, but only a few choose to take it. Equal-

ity is formal but not representative. School does not encourage class segregation, it only prepares the way for it.

The notion of equality that applies in schools and universities says that class affiliation should *not* be articulated, that boundaries should not be visible.

Paradoxically, this can increase the discrimination in the system. It makes the background a tabooed sphere; this private concern is difficult to pin down and hard to communicate. It is not class background that prevents this but personal qualities, they say. Only by acquiring the qualities that the school encourages can the class traveller be helped on his way, but this means denying his perspective.

From the individual's viewpoint, the predicament is made bearable by the knowledge that he or she is on the way to something else – that the present affiliation is only provisional. There is a promise of real life in the future.

Many educated people of working-class origin tell of a strategy which we can call being *capable* (a rather inadequate translation of Swedish *duktig*, an adjective which not only expresses a condescending admission of cleverness but also overtones of reliable but unimaginative proficiency). They played down their origin and achieved dignity by showing off their competence. They worked and “swotted” to attain the recognition that they believed others were born with. Or as one of the people in my survey remarked resolutely: “It was only a matter of working, of getting on and studying.”

“In my class there were no less than three or four who came from professors’ families and had an academic foundation. They got so much free. They had a library at home and a tradition of reading books and reference works and things that I had to borrow. That was obvious when we had to write essays. They had a tradition that was self-evident for them but not for me.”

Working-class pupils’ dependence on their own achievement, and comparisons with pupils from an academic background led to a struggle between the truly gifted and the spoiled. *They* had been given everything at home and were therefore suspect; *they* had been seeded on ac-

count of their fathers’ social prestige whereas we had to qualify using our own talents.

“Those bloody upper-class scum got everything free, he knew that. Help from home in every way. Money if they needed it. Contacts. He had nothing, only his energy and his will. And his reading head, as his teacher had once said.

Work was what counted. The individual determines his own destiny. Forges his own fortune. It’s only a question of will” (Andersson 1980: 70).

The life-stories can, logically enough, confirm that it was a common attitude to feel “selected”; these students had a vocation to administer the special intellectual gifts with which they had been endowed. There was no hope of winning points on account of their lifestyle, manners, etiquette, or civilization. When they were praised it was for having succeeded *despite* their background.

Their capability also increased their social homelessness. Along with intelligence as a source of their identity, there has also emerged an *individuality* in the sense of lonesomeness. It was the personal baggage, the individual’s qualities, that brought rewards, not socially formed perspectives. “I know that I have become what I am through what I have achieved,” as one academic said with satisfaction in an interview. By this he meant that what had happened during his career was under his control, he himself was responsible for what he had become. And in a world where you become what you achieve, the guiding star of reason shines bright, while irrationality is glimpsed in chiaroscuro along with mysticism, romanticism, and inherited cultural characteristics.

This isolating cleverness was also reinforced by social isolation. The class traveller would probably find himself treated with bewilderment and could sometimes even be expelled from the youth groups of his home environment, rejected by his old playmates and friends. There is a close watch on the boundary between those who continue beyond compulsory school and those who start working as soon as possible. “I became a loner, went around by myself thinking and minding my

own business”, is a comment from one who experienced the double loss of affiliation: not being fully accepted by the people he had to turn to, and rejected by those he was forced to leave. Ronny Ambjörnsson, a professor of the history of ideas who comes from a working-class home, tells of how he had to abjure his background when he came to grammar school; this meant rejecting the working-class identity markers of being hard-working and *skötsam*, another key adjective meaning “conscientious, orderly, sober, reliable”:

“The concept of conscientiousness did not have the same central importance for my new schoolmates from bourgeois backgrounds, and did not have nearly the same rich meaning for them as for me. This was a sort of fall from grace in my life; I began to find conscientious people puritanical, limited, and boring” (Ambjörnsson 1988:9).

The liberation

For the children of academically educated parents it has been a matter of course that studies should lead to more studies. They have not needed to be told this directly – they have done it anyway. The strength of their internal reproduction is shown by the fact that 87 per cent of the children become either professionals or industrialists (Vogel 1987: 81ff.). Nor have they needed any instructions about what they should become – parents have been able to trust that their children would make the right decision on their own. Everyday impressions guided them to some extent. The father took his son on walks through the forest and taught him how to discover and name the world. On Sunday afternoons they went to museums and art exhibitions. Conversation round the dinner table was an education in itself, giving ideas to be incorporated into the school assignment; there was a comfortable reading chair by the bookcase.

We hear a very different story from children from homes lacking an educational tradition. Their schooldays and higher education meant a heavy financial burden on the parents. Education was a family investment, yielding returns only long afterwards. They were aware

of how much was sacrificed for them. They can seldom remember getting any real help with homework. Instead they received support in the form of watchful discipline, anxiety and hopes, constant exhortations to be hard-working and conscientious. “Mother was really strict. She beat us as soon as we disobeyed. And if we didn’t do our homework...” The mother told them to study, but did not tell them how.

We often hear that it was the mother who was the driving force at home. She had time to think of her gifted children, in the wish that they could fulfil the educational ambitions that she could not; she took a job as a cleaner in order to make it possible for them to study; she followed and admired their progress; and it was to her they showed their grades and their graduation certificate. The father is more often depicted in the classic pose of male breadwinner, whose masculinity can make it difficult for him to communicate with his sons. He provided the economic conditions that allowed the children to leave home, but he was unable to maintain contact with them when they had graduated from high school:

“By frugality and overtime
he brought up three sons to graduate.
He breathed and lived through them,
they became steps towards the sun.
He himself had never been to the cinema or the
theatre
or had time to read books.
They had succeeded, and now they come home
at weekends
and talk with foreign voices about these
things.
Their women have cold eyes
and despise him when he eats off the knife.
He will never understand
who built the wall of his loneliness”.
(Sjödín 1949)

Children from the working class who embarked on a career not infrequently come from families with a great willingness to break away, from homes where the parents were active in politics or trade unions working for change. These settings have been permeated

by diligence, thrift, and a strong work ethic, spurring the children still more to “become something” – else (Hultqvist 1988).

There are circumstances in people’s everyday experience of family, relatives, and secondary groups which make them leave home and embark on a career path away from what they are used to. And it appears not to be the pattern solely in academic families but in working-class and middle-class homes. I shall discuss elsewhere what features of the family structure and kinship relations may have contributed to the breakaway.⁸ Here we can merely note that the ties were of a liberating kind.

Another circumstance is frequently mentioned in the interviews. Somewhere in the family there is the distant model of a relative with an education: a clergyman, a teacher, an officer, an aunt who writes, a doctor. This person in the familiar world testifies to the possibility of class travel, proving that the family actually has a tradition of learning, that there really is a “restlessness”, and so on. Virtually every informant who has spoken about his background has mentioned an uncle or an aunt like this. Perhaps there was a chance to stay with him or her in the town with the distinguished school, perhaps he or she supported the student in other ways. The existence of such a relative – the rule rather than the exception – always reinforced the feeling that the important things in life are somewhere else.

Such factors in the social setting combine to persuade the would-be class traveller to break away, to leave the perspectives that flourish in the class where he was born and to listen to other messages. Even his own immediate world tells him to get going.

Towards security and unease

Sending children to school has been the surest way of guaranteeing their security. If the working-class family is anxious that the sons should have an education while the daughters have to face the prospect of doing something more practical and domestic, the hope is that the daughters can marry into circumstances that the sons have to acquire. This also means

that the children have primarily chosen or been encouraged to follow an education leading to a profession, so that they can become something. Professions such as engineering, social work, teaching, and the clergy are dominated by people with origins in the working class or the lower middle class. Back in the 1930s the theological faculties in Sweden’s universities had the greatest number of students who did *not* come from class I (cf. Frykman 1988: 129f., 161, n. 104). In government authorities offering both employment and education – post office, customs, defence, police – there is also a relatively strong representation from these strata. Professions like these have taken over the role of primary school teacher as the first step in a family career.

If education liberates the individual from his background, it seems probable that it is his profession and his talent, diligence and other extrospective facets which make up the basis for his way of life. He has broken away from circumstances to which he cannot return. It can also be a relief and an advantage to escape ready-made definitions of existence. “We tend to see the breakup of old interpersonal relations from the suffering aspect, as if one became poor as a result of each loss”, writes Peter Brückner (1987: 43f.), meaning that the absence of parents, relatives, and habits, which would otherwise imprison the individual, can in fact be a precondition for discoveries and creativity.

We may see things more clearly if we compare the experiences of the immigrant. The cancer researcher Georg Klein, by origin a Hungarian Jew but now a naturalized Swede, calls his memoirs “Instead of a Homeland”. He is invoking the words of Nelly Sachs, “An Stelle von Heimat, halte ich die Verwandlungen der Welt.” He left Budapest in 1947, when he was in his early twenties, and came to study medicine in Stockholm. Twenty-two years after leaving Hungary he returned to Budapest in 1970 to lecture:

“The President of the Academy, Hungary’s leading neurobiologist, a highly intelligent and very sensitive man, found exactly the right expression when he introduced me. He did not call me a Hungarian but “our colleague who

originally came from Hungary and who speaks our language as well as the rest of us." This was a perfect definition, and I could not have wished for a better one (G. Klein 1984: 218).⁹

In Klein's autobiography it is his work and the worldwide research community that is the homeland. It is discovery, progress, the future which gives meaning to the daily tasks. It is in the role of intellectual that he feels securely at home.

The examples quoted show how background can become a liberating resource, something to mobilize the individual. Light baggage makes for easier mobility. The class traveller *can*, like the emigrant, become the bearer of progress and change, following roughly the same norms as the "marginal man" described by the sociologist R. E. Park:

"One of the consequences of migration is to create a situation in which the same individual... finds himself striving to live in two diverse cultural groups. The effect is to produce an unstable character – a personality type with characteristic forms of behavior. This is the "marginal man". It is in the mind of the marginal man that the conflicting cultures meet and fuse (Park 1928: 881)¹⁰

That the external conditions exist naturally does not mean that the class traveller becomes a creative boundary-walker, an immigrant in two cultures who has been given the opportunity of perspectivizing both. The conditions nevertheless allow not only for a more relaxed security strategy but also for a greater willingness to bank on the uncertain.

But both groups are haunted to a greater or lesser extent by a special but seldom outspoken sense of insecurity. It originates in the conflict between, on the one hand, society's messages, and, on the other, the sense of disorientation that results from coming from a background that has not prepared one for the present life.

This mental disposition is not confined to an older generation with experience of a more stratified class society. One child of the 1940s, Dan Andersson, economist with the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, who grew up in a working-class district of the textile town of Borås, says: "I can smell out an academic from the working class. He has much less self-confi-

dence" (interview in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* 17 Jan. 1988). Andersson himself has taken advantage of the openness of the educational system. Now he has ended up as one of "the classless, neither lower-class, middle-class, nor upper-class, but pulled up by the roots," and with his main identity associated with his profession. "If I ever had the power," he says, "I would set about a redistribution of self-confidence."

At all events, there is some probability that the many class travellers become their professions, feeling at home more in what they do than in what they are. This also creates a seed-bed for loyalty to *modernity*. Tomorrow offers better solutions. Better worlds can be created with the aid of science, technology, and reason. The breakaway from the old brings a faith in modernity, since it also means coming to terms with one's personal background. The step from the poverty of agrarian Sweden to the modernistic welfare state, the "People's Home", was taken by many who saw that their own career was consistent with social change. The welfare state was the utopia that promised a home, some time.

Mobilizing contexts

The chance of breaking away from one's immediate world is of course facilitated by changed social and economic circumstances. From the 1930s onwards, the number of people in further education has multiplied. The number of university graduates alone has multiplied almost tenfold over a fifty-year period from the 1930s up to the present day.¹¹

Mobility has been encouraged by the rapid expansion of the welfare state and the fact that Sweden has remained outside two world wars. External circumstances like these contribute to Sweden's alleged position as the European country with the greatest social mobility.

But these are not the only factors. In the early years of this century the rate of change was relatively modest. Up to the middle of the 1930s there was stagnation on the labour market and elsewhere. Yet despite this, recruitment to the higher professions was from a relatively broad base. Can it be worth trying to explain this by suggesting that the willingness

to break away has been reinforced by social groups outside the family, and by contexts other than mere expansion?

It appears as if one of the most important background factors was the great number of popular movements, which were common in the late nineteenth century and a natural feature of the Swedish scene in the early twentieth century. The local labour party, the free church, the temperance lodge were all local phenomena preaching a global *message*. When the free church came to the village it instilled a new scale of values in its adherents. It made the members homeless in their village but at home with God and the congregation. It urged them to break with local patterns and enter a community which had the nation, perhaps even the entire world, as its field of action. It made geographical mobility easier that there were free churches in the cities and towns, ready to welcome the traveller among the brothers and sisters in the new congregation. The rootlessness which the class traveller could otherwise have felt found considerable compensation in the familiar patterns offered here.¹² The movements also opened many career paths. A schooling in a religious or trade union movement was an admission ticket to association work, positions of responsibility in local government, political duties on the national level, and so forth. The Swedish Parliament has in this way had a disproportionately high number of representatives from these movements.

Being prepared to break away was an obvious prerequisite for these Swedish popular movements. This is an exciting field calling out for study, which would probably show that mobility has been higher among those who were active in the movements. For example, has a region like Jönköping County, with its high degree of free church activity, bred more class travellers than the adjacent Kronoberg County, which is ecclesiastically conservative?¹³

It is common in my interview material that when academically educated people from the working class and the lower middle class talk about their childhood and youth, there is some contact with a popular movement. Either the

parents were members or they themselves were involved in youth activities of some sort. The educationist Elisabeth Hultqvist (1988) has shown that when students in the 1960s flocked to fill the places at the School of Social Work in Umeå, most of the class travellers came from families with a solid tradition of association activity.

For literary scholars it is obvious that contact with libraries, theatrical groups, or study circles has been of decisive importance for many of today's proletarian writers.

In order to proceed in the analysis of the interplay of national character and social mobility, we need a combination of the more general socio-economic processes and the organization of everyday life in different groups and periods. At present there are more questions than answers.

The shy Swede loses his shyness

A distinctive national character is a form of skill which is developed in the interplay between individual and structure. In order to get on in Sweden today, one needs a different competence from that required a generation ago. Many "typically Swedish" characteristics have been useful for those coming from a humble background into a qualified profession. They have had to refrain from articulating their own style, displaying their own pattern of culture. Being grey was a strategic asset here.

In the Sweden of 1988, people may smile at Gustav Sundbärg's picture of the extropective, honest, chivalrous Swede; perhaps we should even question the portrait of the shy, starchy Swede from the heyday of the welfare state. Today's young people feel a tingle of delight as they rediscover bourgeois culture, taking an interest in breeding and etiquette, daring to stand out in their provocative elegance. Extravagant night life with glitter and champagne testifies to other virtues than those dressed in unobtrusive grey. The friendly but somewhat uneasy use of the familiar pronoun *du*, which has bridged social distinctions during the last few decades, is slowly being re-

placed by the use of the formal *ni*. Perhaps we may find that the reserved Swede – at least in the middle-class world – is a dying breed.

Today's articulation of and striving for distinctions may have its roots in the fact that the state is no longer such an obvious provider of attractive career opportunities. The ideal of service which encouraged both the Swedish extrospection and the starchy shyness is not as useful for today's youth as it has been for today's adult, those in professional employment. Now those who acquire an education are attracted to private industry and the chance of establishing oneself as "one's own master" – this is where opportunity and high incomes are to be found. In this world it is important to emphasize rather than play down one's own profile.

The external conditions fostering a different personal – and national – character are combined with the fact that recruitment to the ranks of the educated is slowly shifting. It is people with a different perspective who are now entering the educational system. It appears as if the influx of people to long-term education is narrowing. With almost 400, 000 academics today, as opposed to a tenth of this number forty years ago, we can expect a great deal of internal recruitment. Families from society's élite will probably be increasingly successful at using the educational system to reproduce their own culture.

More and more of those aiming at a university education come, then, from academic and middle-class homes. And these are homes where parents are consciously concerned about the education of their children, about values such as independence and cultural profiling. Today's young generation has thus been encultured in a world that has prepared them for their future career – perhaps not so much through diligence, sacrifices, and uncertain seeking, but rather in the familiarity, instilled since childhood, in handling social relations and behaving with confidence in the arenas where they move.

We can sum up the way the mobility of the little category of people with a higher education has influenced their character. Twentieth-century Sweden is distinctive for the way the

élite stratum – whether we call them the academic class or the educated bourgeoisie – have toned down their profile. As a category they have served others while showing few individual contours. This is probably due to the fact that they are a diverse mixture of people from different social settings. The blend of people of widely varying social origin can have contributed to the choice of a *neutral* picture of their own identity; a picture in which rationality and competence are given pride of place before what is distinctively and aggressively nationalistic. And it is in this group that high mobility also creates the conditions necessary for playing down distinctive national features.

It is probable that this group's self-image has also had an influence on the way other people define what is typically Swedish. If mobility decreases, we may also hear new definitions. What form Swedishness will take in future depends on what competence tomorrow's Swedes – and in this case the educated class – will be trained for, and on what strategies they will be able to use. But to understand the distinctive national character, one must look closely at the processes which create the attitudes. National character is a constantly changing answer to this encounter of personal competence and external conditions.

Notes

1. Ethnological works including discussions of the problems of the upwardly mobile are Wigerfelt 1981 and Stigsdotter 1985, but these do not take up the connection between national character and mobility.
2. See, for example, Coxon & Jones 1975; Glass 1954; Svalastoga 1959. The present essay is based on, among other things, the results of an interdisciplinary conference at the Department of History, Umeå University, in April 1987, "Social struktur, social mobilitet och social förändring", where my paper "Klassresenärens dilemma" was a pilot study for the present work.
3. The term class affiliation is somewhat vaguely defined. If the population is divided into the three groupings of workers, salaried employees, and professionals and industrialists, only about half have changed class.
4. The research project "The Cultural Formation of the New Class" is financed by the Council for

Research in the Humanities and Social Sciences. I have presented it in Frykman 1986, 1987, 1988a, 1988b.

5. Cf. Frykman 1988a for a discussion of how the life-mode of the educated must be full of contrasts and conflicts. Only through mutability is continuity guaranteed. Children learn to challenge authority, question established patterns, and "get even". In a changeable society any other strategy would be doomed to make them something other than future bearers of the intellectual life-mode. The conflicts are an essential feature.
6. "If it is assumed that an academic education leads to a common cultural identification and sharing of values between individuals, the trend would lead to more similar frames of reference and a greater sense of community within the upper class. This would probably increase the socio-political strength of class P" (Jonsson 1987: 170).
7. G. Gouldner 1979, who argues that the group, despite its obvious fragmentation, has a broad common foundation because it possesses the attitude of critical discourse.
8. In a forthcoming study with the working title "I rörelse: Hur fostras en svensk intellektuell?" I shall discuss the volatility of close relations within the family and how children learn at an early age to see people's qualities and status as fluid and mutable. Society tends to be seen as composed of individuals, and attitudes are adopted as if fixed cultural rules or classifications did not exist. To a certain extent this is linked to a bilateral pattern of authority in families where the mother has both power and authority.
9. The quotation comes in a context where Klein describes how he suddenly rediscovers his past. Streets, visits to museums and theatres take him back to his youth and the hardships of the war years. Science may have become his new homeland, but there was another homeland to return to.
10. Park is quoted by Ålund 1987, who points out that the instability of the marginal man is relative, depending on which immigrant group a person belongs to. A person at the bottom of the Swedish social pyramid who has to earn a living by cleaning or washing dishes is hardly likely to have any creative instability in his consciousness.
11. The number of professionals – the only figure calculated for the educated class – is today around 370,000. In the 1930s it was about 30,000.
12. Ambjörnsson (1988) shows how many of the fundamental virtues in, for example, the temperance movement were intended to liberate the individual from previous social ties that were

considered destructive. See also Balle-Pedersen 1977.

13. Cf. Frykman 1988b, where I show how the free churches around Jönköping were much more successful than those in Kronoberg County in capturing the young and bringing them into tune with the times.

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