

# Reading *Expressen*

## Reflections of Fear in Modern Swedish Society

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The article is based on the ethnological concept of fear as a social phenomenon. The author examines how a popular Swedish daily, *Expressen*, deals with various occurrences of fear in modern Swedish society. The newspaper is rather sensitive to the social and cultural categories which are perceived to be threatened. Namely, it challenges the notions of security, home, and well-organized society. By showing that none of these categories can be completely trusted, *Expressen* not only reflects the feeling of fear, but also participates in the social construction of the same.

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There are many methods one can use to penetrate a given society. One may choose to analyze its history, economy, social structure, basic cultural values, etc. In this essay I will try to present some observations on the modern Swedish society, drawing upon the analysis of the structure of fear. The basis of this essay primarily consists of the "ethnological study of Swedish fears", i.e. the book by Jochum Stattin "Från gastkramning till gatuvåld" (1990); and of the analysis of modern migratory legends in the collection by Bengt af Klintberg "Råttan i pizzen" (1986). These two scholars have presented rather exhaustive analysis of fear, seeing it as a social and cultural phenomenon and comparing the structure of fear in traditional peasant and in modern industrial society. I would like to add some of my own observations to this field of research, obtained by reading a modern Swedish periodical – *Expressen*. I will use the issues of January 1993.

### Feeling of fear as a social phenomenon

The creation of the "Swedish model" is repeatedly characterized by many scholars as a large scale attempt to order and organize society, to

bring everything under control, or at least to extend the boundaries of social control as far as possible (Orfali 1991; Belt 1993). Large data bases, person numbers, public accounts on private income, social interference into the most private spheres, etc., are presented as obvious examples of these attempts. Sweden was to be turned into the "home of the people" (folkhemmet), where everyone was to be equal, protected and safe. Not discussing at length various aspects of this project, I would like to say that at least more or less explicit notions about the importance of things being "under control" has been created; and it seems to me that the influence of this notion on the formation of the structure of fear in Swedish society must have been crucial. Psychologically, people must have felt the impossibility of putting this idea of "total control" into practise: everyday life presented multiple examples of various uncontrolled and dangerous phenomena, emerging most unexpectedly and destroying the harmony and safety in the most "controlled" situations.

These cases are most vividly expressed in modern folklore, particularly urban legends. These "collective fantasies, reflecting the contemporary world view", as Bengt af Klintberg

puts it (1986), contain the manifestations of various aspects of fear: women's fear for male sexual violence; parents fear for their children; personal fear of getting into awkward social situations; the rich Western society feeling threatened by the uncontrolled poor "third world"; and people's fear for the "city-jungle", the new technologies, the ecological catastrophes, etc.

This account can, of course, be extended, the occurrences of fear in modern Western society being far from few. Jochum Stattin, after having compared the fear-traditions in modern industrial and in traditional peasant society, draws the conclusion that contemporary social fear is much vaguer, than the rather concrete expressions of fear in peasant society, where people knew more or less exactly which situations, moments of time and spaces might be dangerous and what sort of punishment certain deeds and violations of the rules would cause. Meanwhile, the character of fear in contemporary industrial society can be defined as some kind of existential anxiety and uneasiness, without always being expressed concretely but which were rather deeply rooted nonetheless. It should be emphasized once more, that Stattin sees fear as a social and cultural rather than individual phenomenon, and presents a detailed substantiation of this outlook in his book (Stattin 1990).

It may or may not be accepted, that fear in peasant society was always expressed concretely; but one could hardly deny that modern society is haunted by a sort of vague existential fear. The ordering and "modernizing" of society, extending the boundaries of social control does not help to weaken this feeling – it may even help to strengthen it.

One can only wonder about the reasons for this phenomenon. On the one hand, we can see it as deeply rooted in the ancient mental pattern, according to which nothing on earth can be completely good: this pattern manifests itself by means of contrast, so common in folklore, e.g. the popular legend about a poisonous snake, coiled inside a soft ripe banana, that a mother gives to her child (af Klintberg 1986). On the other hand, this kind of fear is repeatedly strengthened by various occurrences and

accidents, encountered in the daily life: even the most "safe" circumstances and "well-ordered" environments can become especially dangerous, according to the same law of contrast. The result is that people may not know what to fear. What one commonly perceives as the most safe and seemingly natural situations and objects might suddenly be transformed into the most dangerous.

### Why *Expressen*?

A few words should be said in order to explain why *Expressen* was deemed to be a particularly good source of material for this study.

While analyzing the structure of fear in traditional peasant society, one usually turns to its oral tradition: folk-beliefs, superstitions, legends describing supernatural experiences, etc. (Stattin 1990). Likewise, contemporary folklore can be considered as a good source of information on fear in modern society, e.g., as we have already observed, urban legends present a rather exhaustive scope of modern fear. These legends have a sufficiently well-developed structure, symbolism and other features of a folklore genre, which makes it possible to classify, systematize and analyze them in the context of traditional folkloristic scholarship (af Klintberg 1986).

What makes a difference between modern legends and those told in traditional peasant society, is the mode of existence of modern folklore, i.e. the manner in which it is created and disseminated. Here we are confronted with the important role of mass-media: "it is a fact that a large part of contemporary legendary has been published as news information in daily papers all over the world", states B. af Klintberg (1981). Indeed, newspapers serve as creators and disseminators of modern folklore, and it is on their pages that the new and exciting stories first appear, are endowed a status of truth ("It must be true: I read it in the newspaper!"), in order to be developed later into the full legendary form and to be spread further on by other newspapers as well as by oral tradition. Sylvia Grider has even coined a term to call a new genre in contemporary folklore – "the media narraform" (1981). Thus

newspapers must be paid a great deal of attention as fresh and important source of information on what is perceived by society as threatening or exciting.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that not all newspapers are equally active or successful in this process. All kinds of journalism aim at being interesting and exciting, but there are certain papers that are much more "market-oriented" than others (one may even remember the appearance of the "skillingtryck" in Sweden). This applies first of all to the evening papers, and *Expressen* among them. This daily is particularly commercialized, and therefore every single issue of it must contain some especially exciting material in order to get sold. And what can be more exciting than scary stories! Besides, *Expressen* is oriented towards specific, though numerous, groups of audiences, and this also cannot fail to affect its style and choice of material.

All that taken together makes this daily extremely interesting for a researcher studying the structure of fear in modern Swedish society.

## Dangers in everyday life

Reading *Expressen*, my attention was drawn to a series of small articles, describing various accidents: fires, drownings, injuries, explosions, etc. Every issue of the daily contained from one to several such descriptions. It was the style of these articles that united them into one consistent "saga" about our dangerous everyday life. A typical example reads as follows:

"A 70 year-old woman seriously burnt. The 70 year-old woman wanted to light a candle. Her nightgown caught on fire and the woman was seriously burnt. The accident took place in Farsta yesterday evening. The nightgown and the dressing-gown had been made of synthetic material which easily flared up. The woman rushed into the bathroom and poured water over herself. Then she called the ambulance. She was taken to hospital having 40 per cent burns" (*Expressen* 4/1).

The newspaper fully invokes the contradiction of the given event: the most peaceful and homely situation, even with a touch of romance (old lady lighting a candle) turns into a horrible accident, involving a danger to life.

It would be difficult to distinguish whether these articles have been written by one or by several persons, because their style seems amazingly similar: in most cases the authors do their best to emphasize the seeming harmlessness and peacefulness of the context in which the depicted accidents occur. The initial situation is described as entirely common – everyday events taking place in well-known environments – and then the danger, the threat suddenly turns up as if from nowhere.

"Killed by his own new year rocket" – (*Exp.* 2/1).

"A three and a half year-old boy disappeared while playing in front of his mother's house in Hultafors" – (*Exp.* 4/1).

"The passengers on the train to Vännäs were about to go to sleep. Suddenly smoke filled the sleeping compartments, the train was on fire" – (*Exp.* 11/1).

What sorts of accidents are depicted in this way? The most common seems to be fire: the capacity to suddenly appear from nowhere seems to be in its nature. Fire also presents the most obvious, immediate and serious danger, threatening one's home and life. It might take only 40 minutes while the owner is gone shopping, and his two-story house is burned to the ground (*Exp.* 6/1); or some little pet might knock down a lamp while playing, setting the flat on fire (*Exp.* 8/1). The danger that fire represents for one's home seems to be especially scary, considering the importance of home in Swedish society (see below).

The second group of such accidents are various disasters during travels: the train might catch on fire; one might be attacked and robbed while filling up at the gas station (*Exp.* 11/1); or one might take a solidly looking ferry, which appears to be the "ferry of death" (the article about "Jan Haveliusz" catastrophe, *Exp.* 16/1). Interestingly enough, "ordinary"

road accidents seem to be endowed special status and are seldomly described in this way – only if there is something special about them, e.g. there are children involved.

People who particularly seem to be in danger in such “everyday situations” are children and women. They are perceived as requiring constant extra-protection, otherwise they may just disappear, like the little boy in the example presented above.

One more special trait of these articles is the frequent description of events from another person’s perspective, implying that even if nothing happens to you at some particular moment, you can never be sure that somebody dear to you is not struggling for life somewhere near-by. Let me quote a couple of vivid examples:

“Jessica Torstensson’s brother was only 50 meters and a couple of minutes away from Jessica when she was killed” – (*Exp.* 9/1).

about a woman who burned alive in the laundry room:

“While people in the big apartment building in Malmö were watching Saturday’s News, she was struggling for her life in the smoke down in the basement” – (*Exp.* 17/1).

It is clear that such suggestive passages on a large scale contribute to the creation and strengthening of this feeling of existential fear and uneasiness, which is considered to be so typical for modern society.

## The threatened home

Among the articles dealing with violence those describing the acts of violence taking place in people’s homes seem to be most frequent and most interesting. They fit perfectly into the general line we have discussed: the tendency to present dangerous and violent situations as taking place in the most safe environments, of which the home seems to be the best example. But in order to understand in full the message of these articles, it is necessary to take into

account what the home represents in Scandinavian culture in general.

In this regard, some helpful key-words from Marianne Gullestad’s book can be borrowed (1992). Although she discusses Norwegian culture, her conclusions might be applied to Swedish culture as well. She sees “the home as a key context for intimacy”, “an important setting not only for family life but also for social life”. “In the opposition between the home and the outside (...) home stands for warmth, security, cosiness.” Gullestad argues that Scandinavian culture in general is home-centered: one’s house is perceived as “a last defended bastion”, it has been made into something sacred. It might be added as well that creating one’s home is an integral part of the personal and family identity (Rosengren 1985). The significance of home rests on a long historical tradition, e.g. the middle-class of Sweden manifested themselves as “culture builders” largely by reshaping the notion of home and creating the whole culture of family life (Frykman & Löfgren 1987).

Taking all of this into consideration, it is easier to understand that society is very sensitive to all sorts of danger which threatens the integrity and harmony of the home. Indeed, it is obvious that here we are again confronted with the same law of contrast, which rules the creation of folklore: the greater the importance attributed to a certain cultural value, the more dangerous seems any threat that it is exposed to. Or, in other words, the more distinct and strict borders are drawn, the more rigorously they have to be preserved.

The newspaper also gives a great deal of attention to any threat to homes. One such case we have already discussed – the fires (the amount of space allocated by Swedish newspapers to the fires seems to be amazing and might be perceived by a stranger as something typically Swedish).

Another issue, discussed at length in numerous articles, is burglary. This act of violence is seen as a total catastrophe, and not because of the actual harm caused or the amount of things stolen (that, if mentioned at all, seems to be of second-rate importance), but mainly on the symbolical or psychological level: burglary

is perceived as destroying the wholesomeness and harmony of the world, thus creating chaos. It symbolizes an uncontrolled and dangerous force of a foreign and strange outside world which is breaking into the most controlled private sphere. Let me present a very typical example.

The issue of *Expressen* of the January 11, 1993, contains a large article discussing the fate of a middle-aged couple, who became the victims of a burglary 2 years ago. These people had lived in their house for 45 years, until on one particular night when "the peace, the security and the protective isolation, which they had been enjoying since they moved in 1947, was gone." These people, Nils and Marta Andersson, do not feel themselves able to forget this horrible night, when they were awakened by a blinding torchlight: "At three o'clock four men emerged in their home." Nils was severely beaten, both spouses were tied up and left locked in their house and the burglars escaped with their loot. This event is said to have caused such a shock for both the victims that they couldn't live in their beloved house any longer and had to move away.

Already the fact, that the newspaper chose to depict the event which took place two years ago, is noteworthy. The whole article is centred around the figures of the victims – this is a characteristic feature of almost all the articles discussing violence at home. The acts of violence are usually described from the perspective of the victims, thus encouraging the emotional participation of the readers and creating symbolic image of the whole society as a victim. Indeed, through the symbolic figure of the owner of the house, who is tied to the kitchen chair and forced to watch the robbers ransacking his home (*Exp.* 20/1), it is easy to see society as a victim too.

These articles might be read as metaphors, depicting the situation of essential change taking place in Swedish society. People feel their traditional attachment and devotion to the home being seriously endangered by the forces of the strange and changing world: they feel that something very dear is being taken away from them. At the same time it might be noticed that society apparently lacks flexibility

in dealing with this danger and adjusting itself to the new situation. The notion of the home becomes a sort of trap: after it has been destroyed, people are left with no grounds for further life, as illustrated by the elderly couple described. In this sense, too, society might be perceived as symbolically "tied to the kitchen chair": unable to protect the notion of home (or to preserve it untouched) and incapable of breaking free from its overpowerful embrace.

## The threatened Sweden?

The notion of home – the central cultural value – being threatened, brings us to another fundamental issue: the situation of Sweden itself. Indeed, for many in Swedish society home represents Sweden and Sweden stands for home. No doubt about this parallel being well-grounded in the Swedish culture: it is enough to remember another basic notion, which was (and probably still is?) an integral part of the "Swedish model" – that of the *folkhemmet*. Society as a whole was to be turned into a home for the people, where the main values were to be equality and safety (Orfali 1991; Ruth 1984). The myth about Sweden being an exceptionally quiet and well-ordered country was created and became deeply rooted in people's minds. But the course of daily events couldn't help challenging this notion too.

This simple reasoning might sound too hollow, so let's turn to the material in *Expressen* and see how the newspaper deals with these questions. Among others, one article is particularly interesting: the issue of the January 6, 1993, presents the extracts of the radio-material, recorded during the night when Olof Palme was murdered. The extracts contain the radio-dialogues of people directly involved in this emergency (city-alarm service, police, the ambulance), and reflect their immediate personal reactions towards the tragedy. Let me quote three fragments of the conversation.

- (1) That's too damn terrible that one must be shot on the open street in Sweden.
- (2) ...God gracious, that's not true.

- One can't believe.
- No... is it in Sweden we live, do we?

(3) - Yes, soon total anarchy will reign over the whole world, how... how terrible.

In case (1) it has not yet been learned who the victim is. Still, the cited phrase reveals the general image of Sweden as not being a place in which people are shot in the streets. It is remarkable that the sentence is uttered by a woman working on the city-alarm line who should be rather used to various accidents. Fragment (2) represents the immediate reaction to the news that the person shot is the Prime Minister, Olof Palme. The message is similar, although even more emotionally expressed: the incredibility of such a tragedy taking place in Sweden (spacing in the text is by the newspaper). One can also feel the myth about peaceful Sweden being shaken. And fragment (3) represents the logical (though very emotional again) conclusion: if even Sweden appears to be such a dangerous country, then what can we expect of the rest of the world?

In my view, these three fragments contain an extremely good and condensed evidence of both the existence of the popular image and its sudden down-fall. Indeed, the assassination of Olof Palme is still perceived in Sweden as a national tragedy, challenging all that constitutes the Swedish way of life and the Swedishness of Sweden itself.

The newspaper goes on destroying the myth of peaceful Sweden:

*"Every day 2194 persons in Sweden are robbed, threatened or assaulted. Every minute during the whole day somebody in Sweden is robbed. Every ten minutes during the whole day somebody is hit, kicked or subjected to other sorts of violence" - (Exp. 9/1).*

There can be several ways of interpreting this media discourse. First of all, one gets an impression that the newspaper is fiercely attacking the myth that Sweden is peaceful - and thus exceptional? Indeed, Sweden is obviously dragged down from its pedestal of exception-

ality to the level of the rest of the world, ceasing to present an example and a model for future social development (see also Belt 1993; Orfali 1991). Symbolically again, the murder of Olof Palme is seen as a tragical collapse of the ideals that had been cherished during the rule of his party, and comes as a shock for the whole nation. The myth of Sweden crumbles; and the mass media can not fail to sense and express that. At the same time one can sense that there is more to it.

If we turned upside down the same law of contrast, which has already been frequently used in this analysis, we could say that the danger, perceived as particularly immense (namely, the challenge that the Swedish way of living is confronted with), presupposes the existence of something that can be thus attacked - i.e. that there exist (existed?) reasons to believe that Sweden is a quiet and well-ordered country - at least, if compared to some other parts of the world. Probably, it is not only the notion of "peaceful Sweden" that is being attacked, but also that of "exceptional Sweden"? But then the notion of exceptionality proves to be particularly difficult to deal with. Actually, after one myth is destroyed, another is rapidly created in its place: the image of the exceptionally peaceful Sweden is replaced by the image of the exceptionally violent Sweden.

Discussing this point more deeply exceeds the scope of this essay. It should though be pointed out that the influence of these articles on the social feeling of fear is obvious. Presenting the whole country (and the whole world) as totally overwhelmed by violence, the daily leaves no room for any sense of security and stability, letting the feeling of existential fear reign over society.

## Conclusion

The mass media has been given a great deal of attention in the ethnological and folkloristic scholarship. The importance of the media in creating, spreading and disseminating various popular beliefs and modern legends has been thoroughly examined by Bengt af Klintberg

(1981; 1986). It might be argued that to a certain extent the media seems to play an analogical role in contemporary society to that of the oral tradition in peasant society. The media is very sensitive to various images, beliefs, ideas and superstitions, circulating in society, particularly those connected with fear, threat and danger, and revealing how these notions tend to be perceived by the community.

In this essay only a small portion of the rich mediamaterial could be examined. It appeared to be an interesting and valuable source, presenting the essential social and cultural notions, along with their perception and development. The massmedia has the means to influence this development, for example in our case *Expressen* proved to be a rather active participant in the formation of the structure of fear in Swedish society. The newspaper challenges the idea of "total control" by presenting everyday life as a dangerous adventure (or turning this life into an adventure by journalistic means). It shows that no environment can be trusted as absolutely safe, hereby challenging the notions of the home and the well-organized Swedish society. The newspaper chooses the most important and cherished cultural notions and treats them according to the law of contrast, in order to achieve the greatest emotional effect upon the readers.

In general we can assume that newspapers participate in destroying and constructing myths which people live by. The massmedia hereby reflects ideological changes taking place in society itself. These changes involve a certain degree of disillusion, disappointment, and, of course, fear. It might be stated that from this point of view fear appears to be more of a social than an individual phenomenon, and thus its structure can be actively influen-

ced and shaped by social means and here the massmedia is one of the most powerful agents.

## Note

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