

”Swedish whiteness and Swedish racism”

Presentation by Tobias Hübinette at the *No Border Camp 2012*, Stockholm, 2012-06-21

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of this event for having invited me to present on and discuss about something so emotionally charged and politically controversial as the issues of race and whiteness in a Swedish contemporary setting with all of you who are here. My own background to this is that I regularly as a researcher write texts and lecture on race and whiteness, and that I actively try to make Swedish society to start to speak about race and whiteness, and I will explain why I am convinced that it is absolutely necessary to do so. It is my experiences from researching as well as from publishing and lecturing about race and whiteness in relation to today’s Sweden which lie behind this presentation.

As many of you already know, Swedish whiteness and Swedish racism go back to the scientific construction of the white race as it was conceptualised and developed according to Carl von Linnæus’ racial taxonomy system and with Anders Retzius’ skull index as one of its primary methods. The fact that a number of Swedish researchers were the founding fathers and pioneers of so-called scientific race thinking and the academic construction of the white race from the second half of the 1700s is a subject that several historians have dealt with. However, there is also a tendency to be stuck in history when it comes to discussions on whiteness and racism in Sweden, and research on Swedish race thinking has also come to be subjected to attempts at revision lately.

The important thing for us today is, in my opinion not to quantify the size of the Swedish contribution to Western race thinking, which is an issue that some have tried to do with the argument that the major European colonial powers such as England and France, as well as later on the U.S. and Russia, of course must have contributed far more to the construction of the white race with all their academic might and armies of researchers than little Sweden could do. The same goes for the issue regarding Swedish race policy and how it affected both the domestic minorities and certain segments of the majority population and whether it was more "extreme" than other Western countries’ race policies and race hygiene programs. Nor is it for me particularly important to determine whether the Swedish sterilization program and immigration

law was more or less "extreme" than other Western countries' equivalent eugenicist policies and migration regimes, again something which is debated today, and when it is too easy to fall into difficult comparisons not only between Sweden and the major colonial powers, but also between democracies and dictatorships.

I say this already at the beginning, because I am well aware that the view of the past with regards to issues of race and whiteness in a Swedish context is just as contested as the views on these issues of today. This debate regarding how racist Sweden really was on an official and elite level in pre-war West, because that is really what this debate is about in my opinion, also threatens to obscure the scientific discourse that was absolutely hegemonic for nearly 200 years, and still largely is, namely the fact that Western whiteness as soon as it was formulated from the second half of the 1700s was clearly stratified and hierarchical according to different types, strands and shades of whiteness. I refer of course to the fact that it was the Northern Europeans and the Scandinavians, or to be precise, the Germanic majority populations in Scandinavia with Swedes at the very top, which were chosen as well as appointed themselves as the elite of the white race – at that time known as the Nordic race. The historical construction and even cult of the Nordic race was at least as popular inside as outside the Nordic region, and has been studied by several scholars.

However, few academics have asked themselves what it really means and which the consequences are for a nation that both sees itself and is regarded by others as the elite of not only the white race, but by extension of the species homo sapiens itself, given that non-European peoples were not seen as full human beings during the era of classical colonialism and high imperialism. The relatively extensive research on the history of and the construction of Swedish nationalism and the modern Swedish nation state as it emerged from the second half of the 1800s is surprisingly quiet on this issue and this question. Therefore it is rare to find academic texts on how this almost divine election of the Swedes as the whitest of all white nations manifested itself in different ways in Sweden between around 1900-1960.

So what has this to do with today's Swedish whiteness and today's Swedish racism? Well, first it can be noted that the Nordic countries and the Nordic majority populations with Sweden and the

Swedes in the lead have remained the main projection ground of Western race thinking in the sense that the relative racial homogeneity that is considered to have existed in northern Europe is still seen as the most valuable to defend and to preserve. This explains why the extreme right's hatred for white antiracists and also for white feminists is so strong especially in Sweden and in the Nordic countries, and why questions about interracial relationships and even international adoptions have been brought up so explicitly by the Scandinavian and Swedish extreme right throughout the years, and also why the extreme right violence has been directed at least as much against antiracists as against minorities in Northern Europe. What is at stake in Scandinavia and in Sweden is simply what can be called whiteness deluxe, that is the most genetically and aesthetically valuable part of Western whiteness both historically and for the future. That the discourse of the Nordic race lives on in a contemporary far right context is therefore not difficult to see.

However, it is more difficult and far more controversial to turn the attention to antiracism, whether we are talking about the official state antiracism of Sweden, the antiracist movement, the antiracist consensus contract among the Swedish elite or the antiracist self-identification that is so pervasive within the majority population. Firstly, it is a well-known fact that Sweden in various international rankings is always at the top and appears to be the best in terms of an official antiracism in the form of institutionalised laws and signed conventions against racism and discrimination. Secondly, it can be noted that the Swedish majority population is constantly becoming more and more antiracist according to various Swedish, European as well as international studies where the Swedes again and again appear to be by far the most antiracist people on earth. According to some recent studies, the proportion of extremely intolerant Swedes is nowadays down to under four percent. This is something that government representatives, authorities, NGOs, journalists and scholars like to reiterate again and again, not without a certain national pride.

Thirdly, Sweden is the only nation in the world where the concept of race has been abolished officially as happened in 2001 when the parliament in unison voted for the erasure of the word race backed by a unified scientific community, and which can be compared to another decision taken in the same parliament exactly 80 years earlier when all the political parties voted for the

creation of the world's first national race science institute, supported by its time's scientific community. So in Sweden of today virtually all majority Swedes see themselves as antiracists, even the Sweden Democrats, and even the country's National Socialists orient themselves more and more away from classical race ideology at a time when being Swedish has almost become the same as being antiracist. In Sweden, antiracist rallies and events are not only taking place at a grassroots level but also at an elite level. For example, at the recent Holocaust Memorial Day, all parties, the royal family and representatives of official Sweden were present speaking out against racism, and the almost hysterical antiracist reactions that followed the entrance of the Sweden Democrats in the parliament in 2010 also took place at an elite level and among elite professions such as among journalists, writers, actors, authors, artists and academicians.

Meanwhile, at the very same time, Sweden has in recent years according to a variety of European, Western and international studies emerged at the first, second or third place from the bottom as having one of the most segregated urban geographies and one of the most segmented labour markets along racial lines in the world. It is in other words not anymore a question of differences between native and foreign born, but of being white and non-white.

In fact, less than 50 percent of all Swedes with a background in Africa and Asia belong to the so-called core labour force (among Swedes with a background in Latin America the figure is at least over 50 percent), and around a third of all non-white Swedes are classified as poor. All this means that the world's most antiracist state and the world's most antiracist people, including its elite, exists simultaneously with probably the Western world's most extreme racial segregation structure and racial segmentation pattern, which in practice means that non-whites are denied full access to Swedishness and to Sweden regardless of whether they have immigrated here, are born here or even if they are mixed and adopted as the worrying and negative results also concern such ethnoculturally assimilated groups as mixed and adopted Swedes of colour.

In contemporary Sweden, the idea of being white constitutes the central core and the master signifier of Swedishness and thus of being Swedish, meaning that a Swede is a white person and a non-white person is not fully a Swede. In other words, the difference between the bodily concept race and the cultural concept ethnicity has collapsed completely in Sweden as whiteness

is Swedishness and Swedishness is whiteness. In the hierarchy among Swedes of colour, mixed Swedes come at the top whether in statistical studies or in the national imaginary, followed by non-white adoptees, thereafter those born in Sweden by parents born outside the West, and thereafter at the bottom the non-Western migrants. This of course has to do with race being the core of Swedishness, meaning that to become a Swede goes through blood, something which may explain the record high proportion of interracial relations between whites and non-whites in Sweden in comparison to the native population of Sweden, again another statistically unique Swedish feature in a comparative Western perspective.

When it comes to the discrepancy between this antiracist self-image as well as the international image of Sweden as being antiracist, and therefore a place without any, little or at least a "normal" (in a pan-Western perspective) segregation and discrimination pattern, and the fact that Sweden has come to the forefront in European or even in OECD based statistical reports as being one of the *worst* countries, and especially when the statistics are based on the differences between Swedes with a Western and a non-Western background regardless of migration status, that is according to race, it is at the same time extremely difficult to talk about this as the reluctance to divide the population according to Western and non-Western background is particularly strong in a country like Sweden where the word race itself has become a taboo word. Simultaneously, race has truly run amok in Sweden, and the country is at present more or less in what can be called a racial free fall in the world of numbers and statistics.

To be able to live with this abysmal paradox, whether it be on a political, cultural, social or psychological level, is in my opinion only possible to understand from a race and whiteness studies analysis. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to at least summarise how such an analysis tentatively might look like – that is I will from now on present an analysis of contemporary Swedish whiteness and Swedish racism that is seldom heard.

Firstly, Swedish antiracism has traditionally essentially been antifascism. Racism in Sweden usually refers to race ideology and primarily to National Socialism, which is seen as the most authentic and pure form of racism. Secondly, Swedish antiracism is based on colour blindness, that is the antiracist strategy that came to be cherished by the New Left in the 1970s and which

contains a clear utopian element of wanting to create a postracial world here and now. This antiracist colour blindness, which today is completely hegemonic, has among others resulted in the peculiar fact that discrimination based on race was removed from the new Swedish anti-discrimination law from 2009, while at the same time the EU directive on combating discrimination explicitly says that it is racial discrimination that must be combated, and the same goes for UN conventions and documents which also explicitly talk about race. Thirdly, Swedish antiracism is heavily white dominated and lacks a postcolonial consciousness and an intercultural approach which means that all matters relating to the legacy of historical colonialism are seen as irrelevant in a Swedish contemporary context, and it is even not considered to be necessary to involve or talk to the minorities that are affected by these issues.

A good example of this is the more or less always on-going debate on the Swedish n-word, and where the overwhelming majority of mainly white Swedes constantly reiterates that in Sweden, the n-word cannot be racist as Sweden in the first place is antiracist and as Sweden did not participate in the slave trade and in the colonization of Africa, but instead supported the civil rights movement in the United States and the anti-colonial movements in Africa. Another recent example is the discussion on an artist's work in the form of a cake which depicted a strongly stereotypical black woman, and which has been defended by the vast majority of the Swedish cultural and leftliberal elite as being antiracist.

Last year, it was possible to get a quantified figure of Swedish antiracism as Swedish whiteness expresses it in the debate on the candy company Fazer's China logo, which depicts a stereotypical image of an Asian man. A poll showed that as many as 97 percent said that they could not see that the logo could be offensive to someone in Sweden of today. As a slightly smaller number of women and a slightly smaller number of young people said this, it means that as many as 98-99% of all male respondents and of the respondents over 35 years could not see that the logo could be derogatory to anyone at all in today's Sweden. Also in this debate, it was expressed that such an image cannot be racist in a Swedish contemporary context, as Sweden did not participate in colonialism in Asia and as the Asians are the ones among Sweden's minorities who white Swedes usually both adopt and enter into intimate relationships with the most, and therefore it cannot be possible that white Swedes can discriminate against such a group.

At the same time, non-white Swedes cannot be antiracists, as to be a Swede is to be an antiracist, and as a Swede is a white person (and a white person can be or become a Swede including Nordic, European or Western immigrants and their descendants), a non-white antiracist Swede is an outrageous or even a monstrous figuration or thought. This explains why non-white Swedes who protest against the use of the n-word or who claim that Fazer's China logo is stereotypical are accused of espousing highly problematic essentialist identity politics or of even wanting to censor the Swedish cultural heritage.

In both these examples, the defence of the continued use of colonial words and images is in other words done in the name of Swedish antiracism, and in both cases, no one talks with and listens to the representatives of the minorities themselves, and thus Sweden continues to be the most antiracist country in the world. The same applies to any attempt to publicly debate the various forms of race performativity, that is when whites stage and perform as non-whites in movies and on television, on stages and in stand-up comedy shows, and at dinners and parties, as well as any attempt to criticize so-called "negro humour" and "gook humour" which is so normalized in Swedish visual culture and in Swedish everyday life.

However, there are some specificities to Swedish whiteness which arguably makes it not only the most privileged but also the most peculiar of the different types of whitenesses in the West. To begin in history, according to me, there are basically three moments or phases of Swedish whiteness during the last 100 years, with the first one being about racial homogeneity, white purity and high modernity (Conservative and Social Democratic) nation building roughly between 1905-68 (with key words like race and nation), the second one being about colour blindness, white solidarity and multicultural (New Left and Liberal) nation building between around 1968-2001 (with key words like internationalism and utopianism), and the third and contemporary one being about the (Illiberal) so-called crisis of multiculturalism, white melancholy and (Neo-Conservative) colonial regression and nostalgia (with key words like retro and amnesia).

Of course all these three moments or phases of Swedish whiteness sometimes exist simultaneously and the temporality is not always important, as we are talking about layers upon layers, but this would roughly be a perhaps generalizing historicizing of Swedish whiteness. What we see today is, I would say, something that could be called the return of the repressed in the sense that what we still remember and cherish is the 1968-2001 Swedish whiteness or phase 2, but we are not there anymore, instead we see a return to the good old days of the 1905-68 Swedish whiteness or phase 1. This both explains the dramatically increased interest in Swedish high modernity, that is roughly the time period between the 1920s and the 1960s, as well as the dramatically increased return of all sorts of colonial and pre-1968 aesthetics and tastes within such diverse fields as fashion and design, tourism and lifestyles in general. Finally, all these moments of Swedish whiteness were always about keeping and upholding Swedish whiteness as the most superior, the most elite and the most white of all types of whitenesses, whether it was about a nation building project based on race thinking (1905-68) or a nation building project based on antiracism (1968-2001).

To continue with the analysis, the fact that the antiracist movement, the antiracist discussion, and the antiracist sphere is so dominated by white Swedes is to me an expression of how Swedish whiteness still sees itself as the whitest of all whites and ultimately as all humanity's elected elite and avant-garde, but today as antiracists. After the Holocaust and decolonization, Swedish whiteness has centred on antiracism, that is, to construct itself as the Third World's greatest protector and closest friend in the West. It is no coincidence that the Scandinavian countries with Sweden at the top is the region and the country that proportionally has adopted by far the largest number of non-white children from the former colonies in relation to all other Western regions and countries, and furthermore Sweden has most probably also taken in the highest proportion of non-Western migrants and refugees in comparison to other Western countries, and Sweden is probably the Western country with the highest proportion of interracial relationships and mixed race people as well as being the biggest Western development aid nation.

Swedish whiteness also of course concerns non-whites as well. What is at stake is also the psychic and affective investment among many non-white Swedes both in Sweden and in the Global South as the accomplished utopia on earth regarding everything that is progressive and

democratic and good, and above all, as antiracist. There is a reason why so many non-Western countries send their children to Sweden of all places in such disproportionate numbers for adoption by white Swedes instead of sending them to other Western countries, and there is equally a reason why so many non-Western refugees, and particularly those with a leftist and a liberal political background, want to come to Sweden and not to any other Western country, and finally there is of course also a reason why so many non-whites want a white Swedish partner: it can be likened to a desire to be among the white Gods on earth, to create intimate relations with them and to live in the white paradise on earth and in the end indirectly also to upholding the fantasy of white and good Sweden and this divine-like and megalomaniac and omnipotent type of whiteness called Swedish whiteness.

If Swedish whiteness before had its primary mission to maintain the racial homogeneity of Sweden by methods such as mass sterilisations and a restrictive immigration and assimilation policy, the task is now to maintain a white moral superiority which is articulated through white antiracism. For me, this also means that Swedish whiteness has gone into a kind of psychosis, and can only talk to itself in order to mentally be able to think out and shut out the presence of non-whites in Sweden on a psychic level and refuse to take in the fact that these also are Swedes whether they have immigrated or were born here, and which has severe material as well as psychological consequences as their Swedishness is constantly suspended and they are accordingly made invisible, silenced and marginalized. What is maintained is instead a phantasm about a country and a people who still sees itself as primarily white, and who also wants to be white in the future, and again this is both about a self-image and an image of Sweden and of Swedes both in as well as outside the West. As this phantasm is constituted by a white antiracism which says that Sweden is the world's most antiracist country, one can only imagine what will happen when this phantasm fades away.

The day when Swedish whiteness and Swedish antiracism ends up being equivalent is also the day when whiteness and Swedishness stops meaning the same thing. Since Swedish whiteness right now is in a more or less completely psychotic state, we will probably all in the near future be able to experience how white antiracism will collapse and all the consequences that will follow from this. It is this paradoxical aporia-like situation which I want to call the melancholic

crisis of Swedish whiteness, and there is no way out from it other than some kind of a breakdown, which in practice means a psychic annihilation. It is a psychic state of the nation and a structure of feeling connected to the self-image of Sweden among Swedes as well as the image of Sweden in the world, and it is as much about the humiliating loss of Sweden as the most antiracist country in the world as about the mourning of the passing of the Swedish population as being the most whitest of all white peoples. When the object of love is threatened, under siege or even on its way of being lost forever, meaning both white Sweden and antiracist Sweden at the very same time, there is nothing left but regression and an unspeakable melancholia filled with limitless pain. Thank you for listening!