

The history and position of mixed children of Sweden: A challenge to national homogeneity and racial segregation

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For many centuries, family relations between Europeans and non-Europeans were culturally condemned and socially stigmatised. This concerned both the imperial setting in the colonies, where laws and regulations prohibited sexual relations between settlers and natives, and the metropolitan setting in the Western homelands, where the reproductive borders between the majority population and the immigrants were upheld by institutionalised segregation and violence. The mixed children themselves were often forcefully removed from their parents, and placed into foster and adoptive homes or at orphanages and institutions, to preserve ideals and notions of racial, religious, linguistic and cultural purity.

However, ever since decolonisation started to accelerate after World War II, and even more with globalisation in the 1980s and 1990s, family relations between Westerners and non-Westerners have increased slowly but steadily as a result of the decriminalisation of interracial and inter-religious relations and marriages, the increase in global travel and tourism, and the postcolonial migration of refugees from the Third world to the West.

The history of intercultural relations and mixed children of Sweden starts with the interracial marriages that took place in the Swedish colonies of Delaware, Cabo Corso, and Saint-Barthélemy, and continues with the first non-Swedish migrants who came to Sweden as captives, servants, travellers and merchants and married Swedes in the 18th, 19th and early 20th centuries. After World War II, intercultural family relations became more socially and culturally accepted in Sweden as elsewhere in the West, and the number of mixed children started to increase. Mixed children of Swedish women and Mediterranean men from Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East were born and grew up already from the 1950s and 1960s, and from the 1960s and 1970s children of Swedish women and African men from Africa, the US and the Caribbean became more visible. At the other end, mixed children of Swedish men and Asian women from

East and Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent Eastern European and Latin American women, derive mainly from the 1980s and 1990s.

During the same period, children from South America, Africa and Asia arrived in Sweden in great numbers for international adoption, of whom a substantial proportion are of mixed heritage. This means that the mixed and adopted children together actually constitute the first generation of visible immigrants in post-war Sweden well before the coming of refugees from the Third world in the late 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

The biracial and multiracial children of Sweden, who today number at least 50,000 individuals between 0-50 years old, challenge the Swedish myth of national homogeneity both through their appearances, their backgrounds and their upbringings. At the same time, together with the 50,000 adoptees of Sweden, the mixed children are also showing that it is possible to be a Swede without being 100 percent white, thereby challenging the segregating division between native white Swedes and non-white immigrants, which is today so pervasive in contemporary Swedish society. The mixed children are also very often bilingual, bicultural and sometimes even bi-religious, showing that it is possible to belong to two or more ethnicities, cultures and nations simultaneously. In other words, the mixed children of Sweden are in all respects worrying and blurring the boundaries between Swedes and non-Swedes in their challenging of national homogeneity and racial segregation, and in their multiple belongings and identifications.

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