

Johan Östling. 2016. *Sweden after Nazism: Politics and Culture in the Wake of the Second World War*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn. 346 pages. ISBN: 978-1-78533-142-8.

When Johan Östling's book first appeared in Sweden in 2008 with the title *Nazismens sensmoral*, it was reviewed not only in the relevant scholarly journals but also on the culture pages of the daily press. The debate prompted by the book was unusual for an academic work of history, particularly one with such clear intellectual and theoretical ambitions. It has now been published by Berghahn in a fine English translation by University of Edinburgh's Peter Graves. The question is, however, to what degree can Östling's ideas also be translated in such a way as to have relevance for an English-speaking audience looking in on the Swedish public debate from the outside?

The basic premise of the book is one of a paradigm shift that occurred in Swedish cultural and political life in 1945 as a result of the defeat of Nazi Germany. For Östling, the victory over Germany not only thoroughly discredited National Socialism as a social and political system, but this taint extended to all things and persons associated with Germany and Germanness. Furthermore, as Nazism was seen by many in Sweden to be an ideology that took aspects of backwards-looking, idealistic conservatism to their logical extreme, Östling notes that this gave a group of progressive cultural radicals in the immediate postwar years the opportunity to set a hegemonic agenda by denying the political right any possibility to critique modernity.

What Östling offers is thus an explanation for the ingrained neophilia and self-perception of Sweden as the world's most modern society that is also expressed in the fact that Sweden is an extreme outlier in the World Values Survey. Specifically, he argues that the postwar political consensus, by being constructed as anti-Nazi in its basic worldview, delegitimized anything deemed tainted by its association with Nazism—in practice, meaning most projects to the right of liberal centrism on the political spectrum. The centre of gravity was thus shifted almost permanently to a progressive, modernizing political agenda largely congruent with the social democratic welfare state.

The book is divided into chapters that read like they could be stand-alone articles, particularly since each deals with one particular aspect of Sweden's historic turn away from the German cultural and political sphere around 1945. The chapter title "The Experience of Nazism" is somewhat misleading, as it is primarily an analysis of contemporary Swedish definitions of Nazism from the press and encyclopaedias. As such, it is of limited use for understanding Nazism per se; instead this is a chapter setting the scene of the rest of the arguments of the book, by posting a general Swedish perception of National Socialism (since Swedish society, by and large, never actually "experienced" Nazism) as being an

amalgam of a number of negative traits—e.g. irrational Romanticism, arch-conservatism, and barbaric militarism. Furthermore, Nazism was something seen as being essentially and intrinsically German.

This general perception is then used to discuss important societal shifts that took place around the end of World War II. Two of the cases involve educational policy. One of these reflected the changing definitions of citizenship: from a system at the beginning of the war that raised members of the nation who are grounded in a sense of the past and willing to make sacrifices to defend it to a system that emerged by the end of the war the new policy emphasised fostering anti-authoritarian, democratic, and forward-looking values in the younger generation. Similarly, there was a shift in foreign language teaching away from German—whose literature was dominated by deprecated, retrospective tendencies—towards the more dynamic and modern language of the future, English. Even the skepticism of Swedish jurists towards the postwar discourse of universal human rights based in natural law—posited as an antidote to the value-neutral legalism whereby Nazi jurisprudence could distort justice—is seen by Östling as the progressive, modernist Swedes' mistrust of a return to a deprecated "German" idealism. That the break with Germany and Germanness should be thorough was reinforced by the postwar publication of travelogues by Swedish journalists, who, according to Östling, demonstrated that, despite cataclysmic defeat, the threatening spirit of national socialism remained just under the surface in the German people.

Östling's primary motive seems to be a critique of the postwar hegemonic discourse in Sweden, which is, of course, entirely justifiable. The concomitant effort to wash away the stain of Nazism from some of the political traditions of the Swedish right, however, is more problematic both in its intentions and in how it is attempted.

In *Sweden after Nazism*, Östling presents an elaborate theoretical framework for his study based on the ideas of the influential German historian Reinhart Koselleck. The selected cases and selection of evidence provided in the body of the book are chosen for the way they supposedly reflect this overarching intellectual superstructure. In Sweden, where most historians aspire to be included in the ranks of social scientists (who enjoy greater "scientific" legitimacy in general public opinion), such an approach raises few objections. For an Anglo-Saxon audience, however, where there is a stronger humanistic tradition in the historical profession, Östling's at times limited empirical base—regardless of impressive theory—will likely raise questions about the extent to which his general conclusions have validity.

It is often unclear why one case is deemed representative, and few examples or explanations that run counter to his hypothesis are presented. For example, was the discrediting of German language education in Swedish schools as being tainted by Nazism entirely down to the shift in cultural orientation towards the

Anglosphere? Or could it also have something to do with the fact that the Swedish state Schools Inspectorate had for many years up to 1945 actually employed a *Reich* German Nazi—*SS-Strumbannführer* Hermann Kappner—to oversee how German language and culture was taught to Swedish pupils? Similarly, the way in which the radical conservative intellectual Fredrik Böök is presented as being arbitrarily stigmatized after the war for pro-Nazi sympathies is presented in the context of how his scholarly production was derided on subjective, political grounds by the same societal hegemony like Herbert Tingsten who had attacked him for his politics before and during the war. Could one feasibly disentangle Böök’s political worldview from his post-1945 scholarly writings? His contemporaries would not think this possible, seeing as Böök never renounced his previously articulated political sympathies—which Östling also says.

There are a number of meaningful figures absent from Östling’s narrative. One is the liberal public intellectual Åke Thulstrup. Thulstrup helped shape the Swedish public discourse on Nazism and its Swedish supporters before the war, during it (e.g. with his 1941 book *Fredrik Böök som politisk skriftställare*), and afterwards, especially with *Med lock och pock: Tyska försök att påverka svensk opinion 1933-45* (1962). This latter work is particularly interesting for Östling’s argument about stigmatization and exclusion of former Nazis, as Thulstrup apparently modified his manuscript following consultations with the aforementioned Kappner—one of the main actors of the book.

The radical conservative father of geopolitics, Rudolf Kjellén, is another interesting case—he overshadows Östling’s book, yet rarely appears explicitly. Östling mentions, for example, that Kjellén coined the term “national socialism” and has been portrayed as an antecedent of Nazi policies of *Lebensraum*. For anyone acquainted with Kjellén’s oeuvre, however, it is striking that Östling’s concept of the “Ideas of 1945”—to which he devotes a whole chapter—borrows heavily from Kjellén’s 1915 publication *Die Ideen von 1914* and its criticism of the liberal–progressive “Ideas of 1789.” What Östling means by this intertextual wink to Kjellén remains unclear.

Sweden after Nazism is a challenging and thought-provoking book that analyses and questions aspects of the postwar consensus in Sweden. In its translation for an English-speaking audience, however, it is more likely to be seen as an interesting intellectual exercise and an essay that prompts more extensive empirical research than as a conclusive study and watershed in the historiography.

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