

## ON SWEDISH CULTURE – A COURSE I HAVE NOT GIVEN

*Осень 2013 года оказалась удивительно богата на яркие события в жизни культурологов. Кроме Конгресса и Собрания Научно-образовательного культурологического общества в ноябре в РГПУ им. А.И. Герцена отмечалась еще яркая и «сдвоенная» дата – двадцатилетие кафедры теории и истории культуры и юбилей ее заведующей – доктора искусствоведения, профессора Любови Михайловны Мосоловой. Среди прочих сердечно и тепло поздравили друзья и коллеги из Швеции. В середине 1990-х годов кафедра приняла участие в совместном шведско-российском проекте, призванном не только обогатить опыт преподавателей, но и, в конечном счете, привести к модернизации образовательных систем в гуманитарной сфере обеих стран. Год от года проект разрастался, охватывая как разные ступени образования, так и различные регионы. Учителя школ Санкт-Петербурга, Выборга, Глазова и Моталы (Швеция), преподаватели разных кафедр РГПУ им. А.И. Герцена, университетов шведских городов Йончеппинга и Линчеппинга с невероятным энтузиазмом осваивали инновационные методики и технологии образовательных институций обеих стран. Тогда профессор Эдгар Альмен заведовал кафедрой теологии и религиоведения в Линчеппингском университете и принял самое деятельное участие в реализации проекта. Приведены воспоминания как событий прошлого, дана оценка полученного опыта и произошедших с тех пор изменений в образовании. Проведен сравнительный анализ не только двух образовательных систем, но и двух культур – шведской и российской. Это взгляд на свою родную культуру человека, получившего возможность глубоко погрузиться в культуру соседней страны. Особый интерес представляет тезис, что культурная идентичность, о которой так много говорят в России, – это не что-то застывшее на уровне фольклора и этнического наследия; она может и должна меняться, наполняясь новыми смыслами и содержанием. Только в этом случае возможно обновление и движение вперед.*

**Ключевые слова:**

*культура, культурная идентичность, мета-теория образования, образовательная система, фольклор, этнос.*

In the late 90's, when Professor Lubov Mosolova and I met every year, and when we tried to improve our common language basis in order to better understand each other, and when she was planning for her Swedish study program in the Alexander Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia, she said something I interpreted as a wish to see me in St. Petersburg giving a course on Swedish culture. I had never even thought of giving such a course, and we never made detailed plans, but I found this task interesting and challenging, and many times since then I have asked myself how I should have done it if I was asked once more. Whenever I thought about it, I found ambiguities or even paradoxes in every start I tried.

As in every course, you can use different strategies when you organize a course on Swedish culture. Many might say, a course should be structured from a chosen theory determining the key concepts used in the course. I prefer to try to create a dialogue with the students and their theories. In this case I should try to come to terms with those understandings of (Russian) culture which I thought I saw in St. Petersburg. And what I saw pointed in different directions – which helped me to see also Swedish culture from different perspectives.

One very distinct memory from St. Petersburg is from teaching in a class in School Nr 210. As far as I remember we talked about “life questions” and about different cultural traditions and moods in approaching them. Anyhow I sang a Swedish folk song for the students and asked them to sing a Russian traditional song for me so we could compare them. They looked at each other as if asking themselves “Do we have such songs?” At last one girl sang a song and told us that she had learnt the song where she was born. The other students neither knew the song nor the fact that she was not born in the city. My impression was that traditional culture was something for more peripheral regions, not for cities or for the whole of Russia. This impression was strengthened when I looked in a second hand bookshop for books about traditional culture and found a lot about peripheral Soviet republics but nothing about Russia. In an odd way it was also strengthened when I saw Alexander Borodin's opera Prince Igor. Why are the good tunes in this opera modeling the Russian nation given to the Polovtsians and the Russians mostly singing drinking-songs? I cannot imagine a Swedish opera handling Swedish culture in that way (especially not from that time).

But when I tried to understand the philosophy of education of my new Russian friends I found quite another view of culture. We tried to talk to each other, and especially Professor Mosolova made great efforts also between our gatherings. But we were all totally dependent on the translation efforts of Ludmila Utchneva Uster both in personal communication and in using texts. She worked a lot on two texts by Professor Alisa Petrovna Valitskaya on "Modern Education Strategies" and "Culture-Creative School", and I tried to use them as a basis for further questions when we met and when I tried to read also the subtext or undertone of Moisej S. Kagan, *Mensch – Kultur – Kunst*. I am still not certain, but I think that what I met was a meta-theory of education quite unlike the one in which I was brought up. In our Scandinavian/British/American tradition Pedagogy is a behavioural science, and hence education is (the teacher's) work upon (the pupil's) behaviour, guided by knowledge about the effects of different ways of teaching. In the theory I met education seems to be teachers helping students to become sharers of culture or even creators or developers of culture. When I discussed the relation between teachers and parents with Russian teacher educators I got the impression that Russian teachers expected to be criticized not so much for not being technically efficient teachers as for not being good ambassadors for culture, and as ambassadors they were not so dependent on the reactions of the parents as on the judgements from those they represented, from those who had introduced them into culture, that is from their own professors. And when I met ambitious students, I was impressed by the way they were familiar with Pushkin and Dostoyevsky and the other classical Russian authors.

Of course, in this meaning "culture" is something much more important and general than the traditional "culture" of a region, more like "world art culture" as a continuation of science, focussing on the Russian contribution to it. Such a "world art culture" could even be thought of as modern culture in opposition to regional, traditional, old-fashioned or even prejudiced "culture". This modern world art culture should be represented by the best schools, by the cities and, I suppose, by Russia as a whole. Perhaps it is part of this perspective, that "culture" is something that should be studied, conquered from outside oneself and hence distinguished from personal experiences!? I still reflect on my first teaching experience from St Petersburg in School Nr 2. Introduced to a Class 11, fluent in English, I was suddenly asked to explain how we in Sweden teach religion by reflecting on "life questions". On the flight to St Petersburg I had read an ar-

ticle by the Swedish-Croatian author Slavenka Drakulić on her and her mother's reactions to the army symbol on the tombstone on her father's grave (her father had been an officer in the Yugoslavian army, and this was during the Balkan wars). In 15-20 minutes at least 10 students who did not know me before took part in a very interesting and personal talk about our reactions to good and bad qualities of our own parents. I was very happy. They had trusted me and helped me to show what we mean by "life questions" in Sweden and how teaching about them can be enriching! But my Russian colleagues were not impressed at all. Before such a discussion, they said, the students need to study the topic in the library for at least two weeks. Then I understood nothing. Now I take it as an illustration that education should deepen the sharing of culture, and that you attain this sharing mainly by reading (the classics).

Interestingly enough, we met in a period when the transformations of the Russian society questioned this very distinction. In the Soviet Union those educated at Alexander I Herzen State Pedagogical University of Russia were expected to represent this modern culture wanted by the whole union as against regional differences and teach accordingly at regional pedagogical universities. As chief ambassadors of this culture they could be sent around the union and used where they were needed. And the professors of Alexander Herzen University were sent around the union teaching, inspiring and evaluating. But time was changing. Now teacher educators stayed where they were when this circulation stopped, and they were made responsible for a teacher education which now, as far as I understood, focused also on regional languages and on regional ethno cultural studies especially when preparing for teaching in rural areas. When we had one of our conferences in Glazov, some professors were from Udmurtia and knew this region, but many of them were from other places, unprepared for this new regional responsibilities and/or with little hope of getting a job in a region where they knew languages and customs. These schools seemed to have changed their view of culture. And what was expected from schools without regional identity, for example in St. Petersburg?

If these are the understandings of culture among the students of a course on Swedish culture, how should I then organize such a course?

When I heard the idea, my first thoughts were about "traditional" Swedish culture, about folk songs, folk dances, folk dresses, seasonal festivals and rejoicing and even about Dalecarlian horses and the modernized version of this traditional Swedish culture in Swedish popular music etc. But as soon as you try to put words on

it, you see the ambiguities. I could try to plunge deeper into the melancholy into the traditional songs in the minor key where you long for your beloved, separated from her, seeking consolation and hope in the nature, into the different regional cultures or even mentalities shaped by varying landscapes and life conditions, and into a way of interpreting life as lived and mirrored in the seasonal changes. But of course you will also find a lot of nonsense in this, and soon you realize that this is a construction of Swedish culture, made in a special historical period for special purposes. Also the idea of what is “Swedish” – and “Swedish” culture – has its history [1]. So the interesting thing to do here is to describe this very construction of “Swedish” culture in the 19th Century.

“National cultures” in general seem to be constructed in the 19th Century. In Sweden this process got its distinctive mark from the “loss” of Finland, which had been an integrated part of Sweden since the 13th Century (and the simultaneous loss of some territories on the German Baltic coast). The parole was “to reconquer Finland within the borders of Sweden” by strengthening what was “Swedish”, creating a Swedish identity around the Swedish language, the Swedish “culture”, and a harmonized and romantic view of Swedish history. What had been the educational system of the Church of Sweden (integrated with the state on the national level and even more integrated with society on the local level) was transformed into a compulsory school system promoting a standardized language (as against the dialects), a glorious view of Swedish history with its heroes but also with its pretended strong traditions of local (“democratic”) self-governance as against all kinds of feudalism and with the view of Sweden as a country where the different regional cultures were parts of one national culture. If you want to understand Swedes you should know what we have learnt to be Swedish culture. You can find good examples of it in school books for the compulsory school written by some of our best authors, Selma Lagerlöf’s *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* intended as a Geography reader for the primary school helping to integrate Sweden by showing the regions as parts of one country and Verner von Heidenstam’s analogous reader in Swedish history.

But now we also look at this culture as part of a decomposing ideology. The view of Sweden as a uniquely homogenous society is questioned not only by the accelerating immigration after WW II. It has never been quite true. That we have kept internal societal tensions and conflicts secret to ourselves does not mean that we have had none. That we did not until the year 2000 gave five languages of national minorities (Finn-

ish, Miġnkieli, S6mi, Romani chib and Yiddish) special rights in Swedish law does not mean that we have had no minorities. The school subject History has not helped students in the former Danish-Norwegian regions to understand the pre-Swedish history of their regions, has shown little interest in regional protests against the central power of Sweden and (also when we are members of EU) mostly ridiculed the medieval union with Denmark-Norway, not to mention those in favour of a kind of union with the Catholic Poland who lost a civil war battle outside Linköping 1598. And since this view of traditional “Swedish” culture was created in a romantic view backwards on our agrarian past, it has no more helped us Swedes to understand and cope with the modern Sweden with its industrialization and urbanization, and hence it has got political overtones forcing the compulsory school to say more about Swedish culture.

And as the Russian schools teach Russian classics, Swedish schools teach (or has taught) Swedish classics. Especially in the not compulsory “learned” secondary school we had a very elaborated literary “canon” of “good” authors, poems and novels you should be familiar with if you wanted to be recognized as an educated and cultivated person. When I graduated from the secondary school (gymnasium) in Jönköping 1962 I was elected to give the traditional speech in honour of Viktor Rydberg, the great author of that city, on behalf of a new generation, as students had done every year many years before and new students have done every year since then. In Kalmar a similar tradition expects a new speech to the 19th Century poet Erik Johan Stagnelius every year. Also in many other ways this set of important literary works is confirmed and revitalized over and over again. Sometimes also this maintaining of the Swedish literary canon can have a somewhat ridicule effect. In the 1960s a relative of mine married an English woman who had studied literature in one of the very prestigious British universities. When she wanted to teach English in Swedish schools to those brought up in English, she had first to be examined on secondary school level on her knowledge of the Swedish classics (mostly from the 19th Century)! She found the reading interesting but the arguments for the demand unconvincing!

There is an interesting ambiguity in this perspective of elite Swedish culture – and I think you can find the same ambiguity in your Russian tradition. You can find in it traits that fit well together with the more traditional view of Swedish culture. Many of those famous 19th Century authors were key persons in the attempts “to reconquer Finland within the borders of Sweden” and to collect (and refine)

folk songs, tunes and dances and traditional dresses and painting and the like. But others did fiercely criticize this nationalism, as August Strindberg, and there were and are in this perspective pretensions that this literature is not something narrow Swedish but a heritage of all mankind, part of true "world art culture". As you can see in the list of Nobel Prize winners in Literature, at least we Swedes think that many of our authors are of world class, and from the same list you can see also that we try to follow and be enriched by authors from all parts of the world. Sometimes you can perhaps suspect that also in Sweden it can be difficult to be a prophet at home (Luke 4:24). Some Swedes perhaps are more famous in other countries than in Sweden, also authors like Emanuel Swedenborg, Fredrika Bremer or Ellen Key.

As in other nations there is also a "modern" construction of Swedish culture which became very influential in Sweden and in the international understanding of Sweden in the second half of the 20th Century and still is so in most Swedish minds, even if it now seems to erode. As "modern" it is open to change, to rationality and science, to international contacts and solidarity, to psychological and existential perspectives on individual human beings, and to pluralism. On the social level it is the Swedish Model project of the welfare state driven by the conviction that a good society is built on equality, participation and reciprocity. On the world scene it is a perspective of solidarity, in which Sweden has been proud of its lack of colonial ballast and its efforts as a kind of world conscience to help poor countries and oppressed groups. Culturally it can take the form of literature and music from the perspectives of culturally underprivileged – workers, women, sexual minorities or immigrants in Sweden or other categories in other countries. In short, this "modern" Swedish self-understanding was and is constructed as an avant-garde of modernism in the world!

This self-understanding is formed and reflected upon in many forms of modern "Swedish culture" such as popular music, radio and television programs, newspaper articles, adult education (an important tradition in Sweden) etc., all in different forms from more occasional products to more ambitious ones. You can also think of national or popular movements (folkryrelser) as an important Swedish tradition with cultural stamps of their own and as a way of organizing discussions and common efforts which has become important in the Swedish way of life (culture) and in the Swedish way

of understanding democracy. Of course it is also formed and reflected upon by many Swedish 20th Century authors like the Nobel Prize winners Par Lagerkvist, Harry Martinsson and Eyvind Johnson. As in all serious cultural efforts, the ambition of course is to form and reflect not only upon Swedish human life but upon human life as such. And as in all "modern" culture, here all traditions are questioned, also the national ones. But nevertheless, also "modern" culture in Sweden probably can be discerned as Swedish in one aspect or another.

So far I have tried to trace "Swedish culture" in dialogue with some Russian understandings of "culture" both through its "traditional" and its "modern" constructions. Now it is tempting to try to trace also signs of attempts to construct "Swedish culture" also in post-modern ways.

One possibility could be to use the logic of the Eurovision Song Contest as a possible pattern: Each country is expected to choose something which represents the best of its own culture, but in order to get any votes it must be done in such a way that listeners from other countries enjoy it! Is post-modern "Swedish culture" what can be appreciated by non-Swedes?

Candidates then show up like Swedish pop music and crime novels selling world-wide. And perhaps non-Swedes continue to be fascinated and challenged by Swedish film directors like Ingmar Bergman or Swedish poets like the latest Nobel Prize winner, Tomas Tranströmer, or by Swedish authors for children like Astrid Lindgren. But then what non-Swedes find interesting is not always the same as what Swedes concentrate on. We Swedes have to try to understand that and why Russian children, when they read Astrid Lindgren, find Kroschka Nils Karlsson more important than Pippi or Emil.

And perhaps the Swedish post-modern cultural contribution will be less in what Swedes create than what Swedes perform. In classical music it has been so for a long time. We are proud of good Swedish performers on the world scenes, like Jussi Björling, Nicolai Gedda (with also Russian roots), Birgit Nilsson or Ann Sofie von Otter, and of Swedes listening to and performing the best composers of the world and enjoying "world music" from all parts of the world. We also have very good choirs in the tradition from Eric Ericson winning a lot of international competitions – singing very international repertoires.

If this is what post-modern national culture is, it becomes even more important to give courses abroad on one's own culture!

### Bibliography:

- [1] Hägg G. *Svenskhetens historia* (The history of what it means to be Swedish). – Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 2003.