PUB-GOING AND IMMIGRATION
Two Intriguing Intercultural Problems

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On first reflection you might think that Sweden and England are two very similar countries with identical cultures. The general view of a Swede not very well versed in English society and culture is probably that England and Sweden have a lot in common. And one can certainly think of a great number of examples to prove that not too sensational statement. To begin with, one thing that Swedes and Englishmen seem to have in common is a wry sense of humour. Probably nowhere outside Britain have Monty Python and Fawlty Towers raised so much laughter as in Sweden. Furthermore, Englishmen and Swedes appear to share a degree of shyness, or what we perhaps might call a form of northern taciturnity, in certain situations. Both groups of people are somewhat withdrawn in a polite kind of way, something which one can almost consider to be a national characteristic. Maybe that goes along with the wry humour. Linked to that is also a certain hesitation, even reluctance, to try out new things and, as we know, England is world-famous as the stronghold of conservatism. If we explore a more basic level, sport is another common denominator. Many people in the two countries are dedicated supporters of football, but while football might be a matter of life and death to a lot of Swedes the game is much more important than that to an Englishman. Yet another phenomenon that the two countries obviously share is pop-music and popular culture in general, and we only need to mention The Beatles and ABBA as the most successful examples in order to realize the potential of popular culture to penetrate through every layer of the great masses of the English and Swedish societies.
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If we give the issue a more thorough consideration, however, the respective
cultures of the two countries do not appear identical at all. That this is the case
might become a bit clearer if we, to begin with, scrutinize a phenomenon dear to
both Englishmen and Swedes—pub-going. In both countries people enjoy
visiting the pub, but when it comes to pub culture the difference is huge. A
Swede visiting London might find it a very odd custom to close all the pubs at
eleven. An Englishman visiting Sweden, on the other hand, can hardly find his
way to the pub. He thinks in fact that there are hardly any pubs to find at all. His
first, futile, question in the new country will probably be: “Where is the local
pub?”

And then, having finally made his way to one of the few Swedish pubs—
the prices! Although the price for a pint in most regions of Britain has now
broken the painful limit of two pounds sterling, that amount is miles away from
the horrendous prices for a Swedish "stor stark." That, by the way, is another
difference—the measure of volume. It is of course possible to be served a
decent pint¹ in a few Swedish pubs (mainly in British pubs gone Swedish) these
days but the going order at the bar still is "stor stark," a mere forty centilitres of
tepid Swedish beer. Not much to please a genuine British beer lover!

There have, as we have noticed, in recent years emerged quite a few
English, Scottish and Irish pubs all over Sweden (and most of Europe,
presumably). Only problem is—they do not look very British. With hardly any
exception these pubs are more or less successfully converted and modified to the
Swedish way of pub-going and to the Swedish way of life. Try to think of an
example of a pub in England with table-service or with an enormous athletic
guy guarding the entrance! On the bright side, though, it is now possible to get
"the great British invention," fish and chips, in the Anglo-Swedish pubs. This
traditional British dish, however, is cooked the Swedish way and, worst of all,
served without vinegar!

All these probably are well-known facts, but the differences go much deeper
than that and cut through the very social patterns of pub-culture. In England, as
we know, it is almost an everyday thing to visit the pub, be it just for a pint on
two on the way home from work. But not only do we find a great difference in
the frequency of pub-going, the system of how to pay for the drinks is also quite
different. In Sweden it is customary that people split the bill and share the cost
round the table, each person paying his / her own drinks. That would be
regarded as quite ludicrous, even insulting, behaviour in England. In England
pub-goers speak of "rounds." That means that one person walks to the bar to get
all the drinks for the whole company and pays for the lot. He /she stands a whole
round of drinks. Next time the fellow sitting next to him / her will be paying the
round, and so on.

¹The volume of an English pint is 0.568 litre to be exact
With all due respect to pub-going as a social phenomenon, it might be regarded as somewhat trivial compared to more serious social problems. Therefore I would now like to discuss a crucial and much debated contemporary topic, namely the assimilation of immigrants in the English and Swedish societies respectively. As we know, Great Britain was for more than a century—until the dismantling of the British Empire after the Second World War—one of the great powers in the world. Great Britain had a position of world dominance, and at the summit of its power the British Empire comprised one fourth of the total area of the world. This fact is of utmost importance for the great difference in assimilation and acceptance of immigrants between England and Sweden. While English society has been used to see a great number of immigrants enter the borders of the country for at least a century and a half, large-scale immigration is a much more recent phenomenon in Swedish society. Sweden, it is true, had the Italians, and to a lesser degree the Hungarians, as "Gastarbeiter" already in the fifties, with the Finns arriving shortly after to work in the major Swedish industries. But it is only in the last two decades or so that Sweden has seen a dramatic increase in the number of immigrants.

This difference is manifested in a great many ways. While immigrants have become more or less accepted and are a natural component of society in England, Swedish society has not yet reached that point of maturity. The tolerance of immigrants appears to be much less in Sweden and the very alarming expanding problem of (neo-)Nazism is only one of its expressions. The immigration problems common in England, say, thirty or forty, even fifty, years ago we are now facing in Sweden.

One illuminating example of this difference surfaced in my mind the other day as I tried to chase for Christmas-labels, or what we in Swedish call "juletiketter." It then struck me what an important means of communication language after all it is. I went into some six-seven convenience stores and to my surprise and dismay it was utterly impossible to find what I was looking for. The reason that I did not find what I wanted was not that all these shops were sold out of that particular item. One or two of them might have had the badly needed thing somewhere, that I do not know. The problem, rather, was to be found at the level of communication. It soon became clear to me that the shopkeepers I inquired simply did not understand the Swedish word for what I was looking for.

Of course these people are not to be blamed for that, that is not my point, but it surely set my mind thinking. Until then the fact had not occurred to me that almost all small shops of this kind in Sweden are run, and probably owned, by immigrants these days.
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This, I am quite convinced, is a very recent phenomenon. In England, on the other hand, it has been an established fact for a good many years that these shops are mainly run by immigrants. There is no such tradition in Sweden and the countries of origin of these new Swedish shop-owners are difficult to tell. That is not the case in England where there is a long tradition of Indian and Pakistani newsagents and tobacconists, owning and running these small shops, all over the country. It has not crossed my mind to ask for Christmas-labels or anything as trivial while in England, but I am certain that this problem of language discrepancy would not arise there. The Indian newsagents, and immigrants generally, have become so established and so well-assimilated into the English society that no such communication breakdown would be possible. When will we reach that level of intercultural communication in Sweden, one wonders?

This episode, and more importantly, the many cultural clashes with the concomitant linguistic problems in Swedish society today clearly show the difficulty of intercultural communication. The great problem to assimilate immigrants into the Swedish society is more a consequence of ignorance of new cultures and of not understanding each other than a suddenly emerging latent racism within the Swedish people. It is simply a problem of intercultural communication. Therefore, a thorough cultural education both for Swedes but most of all for our new immigrants is of utmost importance, so that we all get adjusted to this new multicultural society as soon as possible. Measures have to be taken quickly—it must not take the fifty years or so that we are behind England to reach the same level of assimilation. We must reach out to the many new inhabitants of this country before it is too late. Greater emphasis on language teaching is one way to accomplish that important goal.

It is very alarming when the everyday attitude of the Swede about immigrants is something like: "I'm not a racist, but...". The reticent acceptance of such hostile views is bad enough. Even more frightening signs are the growth of Nazism and the violence of society in general. These are signs too dangerous to neglect. Tellingly enough, these signs were obvious in the English society not very long ago. To a large extent the symptoms have now been remedied in England. However, we simply cannot afford to repeat the mistakes made in the English society only a few years back. Certainly, an increasing concentration on intercultural communication in school and university curricula and at all levels of society is one important way to try to come to terms with the serious problem of assimilating immigrants in the Swedish society.