

Sweden's counter-extremism model and the stigmatising of anti-racism

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Given the neo-nazi terror that Sweden experienced in the 1990s, one would have expected its government to have a clear idea about the dangers posed when far-right organisations procure weapons and prepare for race war. This Briefing Paper outlines the nature of racism and fascism in Sweden today. It examines Sweden's counter-extremism policies and asks why the ministry of justice is increasingly at loggerheads with a younger generation's anti-racist values.

A resurgent far Right

Could Sweden be returning to the levels of far-right racist violence, bomb attacks, attempted assassinations and murders that it suffered in the 1990s? (A summary of the worst incidents that occurred in the 1990s is provided in the Appendix to this report.) Perhaps the short memory span that accompanies an age of 24-hour TV news explains why so many in Sweden regard terrorism as a phenomenon that started on 11 September 2001. Worryingly, outside the realms of committed anti-fascist monitors and journalists and well-established organisations like the Institute of Race Relations, few remember this dreadful period in Sweden's post-war history.

Back in the 1990s, the activities of the 'suit and tie fascists'¹ of the Swedish Democrats (SD) – which emerged out of the notorious neo-nazi organisation Keep Sweden Swedish² – were one part of a jigsaw, with the other pieces provided by openly violent organisations like the Reich Front, the Storm Network, Nationalist Socialist Front and White Aryan Resistance (VAM).³

Much the same pattern exists today, with one vital difference. The Swedish Democrats, led since 2005 by Jimmie Åkesson, have moved from the margins to the mainstream.

Distancing itself from its neo-nazi roots while continuing its tradition of xenophobia and anti-Muslim racism, the SD has rebranded itself as an anti-immigration party along the lines of the Danish People's Party. With twenty MPs in the Swedish Parliament (*Riksdag*) it tends to abuse and provoke rather than openly espouse violence.⁴

The SD's embrace of the parliamentary road to power has had consequences – both for the overall political culture of Sweden, which has had to accommodate the SD as a legitimate political party, but also for its peripheries where the far Right, in response to the SD's success, has become more fractured and, in the last few years, more violent. Some SD members, expelled from the party or disgusted by its attempts to climb the greasy pole of electoral politics, are leaving to join the Party of the Swedes (*Svenskarnas Parti*, SvP), a National Socialist party whose official party programme states that 'only people who belong to the western genetic and cultural heritage ... should be Swedish citizens'.⁵ Also accused of violence are the Swedish Defence League and the Swedish Resistance Movement (*Svenska Motståndsrörelsen*, SMR) which, for the last two years, have been behind many acts of intimidation and violence aimed at Muslims,

gays, feminists, anti-fascists and even prominent Social Democrats.

Sweden, mercifully, has not yet reverted to the far-right bombing campaign and the White Power terrorism that marred the country in the 1990s. But a growing anti-racist, anti-fascist movement is highlighting, and countering, what feels like an early form of terror to many on the receiving end of the violence. All the warning signs are there. There has been another sniper like the Laser Man (John Ausonius, who in the 1990s killed one man of migrant origin and wounded ten others, see Appendix.) Peter Mangs carried out at least two murders and five attempted murders in the southern city of Malmö between 2009 and 2010. Attacks on asylum centres are on the increase, as are serious racist and homophobic incidents, with an upsurge of attacks on mosques as well as the desecration of Jewish cemeteries and the painting of swastikas on gravestones. The fascists are attempting to dominate the streets, not hesitating to intimidate and harass those who oppose them, such as Mona Sahlin, a former leader of the Social Democrats. Sahlin was left without security protection when she resigned as party leader in 2011 (and soon after from parliament). It

has become commonplace for her to be threatened on the street by neo-nazis who call her a 'traitor'.⁶ In January 2014, a 16-year-old member of the SD youth wing, who had publicly supported immigration, was assaulted in central Malmö by two men with shaved heads, who spat at her, kicked her and kned her to the ground; they called her a 'disgusting feminist c***' and 'Sosse' (slang abuse against Social Democrats) and said they would kill her if they saw her again. The teenager said she was totally traumatised by her experience and is now reluctant to go out alone.⁷

Ordinary residents in towns across Sweden feel threatened, particularly if they are gay or from racial minorities. In the small town of Finspång, central Sweden, where cars owned by people with foreign-sounding names have been sprayed with swastikas and vandalised, a woman came home to her apartment to find an axe wedged in the door, next to the Star of David and a scrawled message 'Disappear'.⁸ The worst of a list of recent life-threatening attacks came in March 2014, when Showan Shattak, a prominent campaigner in 'Football Fans Against Homophobia', was left in a coma and fighting for his life after members of the SvP drew knives against five people leaving



Showan Shattak, a prominent activist with Football Fans Against Islamophobia, was left with life-threatening injuries following a brutal assault by neo-nazis in March 2014. (Photo: Facebook)

the International Women's Day Reclaim the Night demonstration, also in Malmö.⁹ Two of the assailants had previous convictions for carrying knives and batons, and one, who is subject to an international arrest warrant, is now believed to have fled to the Ukraine.¹⁰

Examining Sweden through the lens of the 1990s, one cannot but help get a feeling of déjà vu. In the '90s, fascists were stockpiling weapons and explosives, forging European and international connections, and some were going off to act as mercenaries abroad. As then, so today. Both the SvP and Nordic Youth boast links to Golden Dawn, the Greek parliamentary leadership of which are currently in prison facing trial for forming a criminal organisation and weapons offences.¹¹ While in the 1990s, European fascists travelled to the former Yugoslavia to join Serb and Croatian paramilitary forces intent on 'ethnic cleansing' in Bosnia, now the preferred destination for Swedish neo-nazi mercenaries, such as the SvP's Mikael Skillt,¹² is the Ukraine. At least four Swedish neo-nazis are known to be fighting with the Ukrainian task force Azov, a squad which flies a flag with Nazi symbols and seeks the establishment of a fascist dictatorship in the Ukraine.¹³ The Swedish Ukraine Volunteers (*Svenska Ukrainafrivilliga*) boast their part in the fight to 'shape a fascist-friendly Ukraine' in order to 'secure the future' of our white children.¹⁴

Back in the 1990s, Sweden had an international reputation as the world's largest



Mikael Skillt, formerly of the SvP, is now fighting for a fascist-friendly white Ukraine.

provider of race hate merchandise and White Power music. Social media today is the vehicle for the same kind of hate. The Swedish Media Council reports that the seven most viewed far-right websites in Sweden, attracting a total of 145,000 unique visitors a day, have seven times more visitors than the total of all the political parties in parliament put together. One of the most popular is the SvP's website realisten.se.¹⁵ Another popular website is avpixlat.info¹⁶ that leans towards counter-jihadism, and according to the Expo Foundation, has unofficial links with the SD.¹⁷

Blind spots, cultural norms and structural racism¹⁸

But where are the intelligence services and the police in all of this? Back in the 1990s, the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* rebuked Sweden for turning a blind eye to the fascist threat, suggesting that it was the only country in Europe 'where terrorists' were given police permits to stage public rallies.¹⁹ The cultural norm was indeed too tolerant of neo-nazism. Within social policy, far-right skinheads were seen as victims who needed to be brought back into the mainstream through a 'positive nationalism'.²⁰ While the problem of organised fascism in Sweden was trivialised, anti-racists were often blamed for making things worse through their 'branding' and 'stigmatising' tactics.²¹ The Expo Foundation, which was co-founded by Stieg Larsson in 1995, may be much-lauded today, but in its first years of existence it



In Ukraine, the Azov battalion, which flies a flag with Nazi symbols, has several Swedish neo-nazi recruits.



In 2013, thousands of people marched against racial profiling after Operation REVA, piloted in Malmö, was rolled out nationwide.

was branded as divisive. From Expo's vantage point in the 1990s, the police were also part of the problem, systematically failing to protect citizens from far-right violence. Have things changed that much today? Sweden's growing anti-racist, anti-fascist movement would give a resounding no. From outside, too, one can see that there has been no clear break with the past, but in many ways a continuation of cultural norms ultra-tolerant of fascism. But what seems different today is the upsurge of activism around structural racism in law enforcement, and the defensive response of the authorities, who clearly see those who highlight racism or call for police reform as a threat.

A number of recent cases taken up by campaigners have focused on police policies and operations, linking racial profiling in policing and the failure to effectively police racist violence, to a wider institutional disrespect for the civil rights of minorities. First there was the controversy surrounding Operation REVA, the nationwide police operation launched at

the beginning of 2013 to pursue, detain and deport undocumented migrants.²² Then, in May 2013, there was the death in custody of a 69-year-old man who was shot through the head after armed riot police, responding to claims that he was brandishing a machete, stormed his flat in the socially disadvantaged Stockholm district of Husby. There may be several explanations for the subsequent disturbances. But the way the death was dealt with by the police and the media was surely an important factor in the five days of violence that followed, with rioting and clashes with the police across Stockholm and in some other cities.²³ One journalist, Johanna Langhorst, writing in *Feministisk Perspektiv*, believed that 'violence and racism within the police organisation was exposed as clearly as a skeleton on an x-ray slide'.²⁴

Then, in September 2013, documents were leaked to the *Dagens Nyheter* and other media outlets which revealed that the same Skåne police force that was criticised in the 1990s for a blatant disregard for the victims of racist

violence (see Appendix, p13), had, since 2011, been compiling illegal databases on the Roma. Within a computer file entitled *Kringresande* ('itinerants'), two registers had been compiled comprising a genealogical tree tracing the social and family relations of over 4,029 Roma (some were dead), around 1,000 of whom were children, and some as young as two years old.²⁵ Amidst a public outcry, the police reported themselves to the police for keeping an illegal register. The justice ministry then tasked the Swedish Commission on Security and Integrity Protection (*Säkerhets-och integritetsskyddsnämnden*, SIN) with carrying out an official inquiry. In November 2013, the SIN concluded that while the registers had an 'undefined purpose' and 'several illegal aspects', (i.e. the processing of personal data based on vague criteria and the casting of 'too wide a net'), and that while the dominance of Roma names could 'give the impression that its sole focus was ethnicity', in reality this was not the case. Inclusion on the register was linked to criminality, not ethnicity, and the original, legitimate purpose of the database was crime prevention.²⁶

SIN's conclusions reflect a closed circuit of thought and a strong tendency in Swedish governmental circles to deny the existence of structural racism.²⁷ SIN investigators, unreckoning of the dangers in stereotyping whole communities as criminally inclined, started from the assumption that it was legitimate to compile a database on the Roma community *per se*. They then downplayed the dangers of data-processing based on racial stereotyping to legitimise a system of racial profiling that is self-perpetuating and eventually contagious. A register which began with the collection of data on Roma not necessarily convicted of any crime, but merely suspected of criminal association, led to the amassing of ever more data on non-Roma whose sole crime was to associate with Roma, either through marriage or through the nebulous concept of 'social relations'. This only serves to underline the fact that the Roma in Sweden are, to all intents and purposes, a 'suspect community'. While the government initially saw



Dagens Nyheter breaks the story of the illegal police databases on the Roma

fit to accept SIN's findings, there is a ray of hope in that the office of the Parliamentary Ombudsman has expressed dissatisfaction with SIN and a new investigation seems likely.

It is possible to trace a continuum between the failure to police fascist violence in the 1990s and the weak hate crime frameworks adopted by prosecution services today. In the 1990s, racism as a motivating factor for assault was too often dealt with from the perspective of the perpetrator (whose social problems and lack of a positive identity were mitigating factors). Today, Swedish law enforcement may have progressed in that racist assaults are dealt with by the police as hate crimes. But, too often, hate crimes are not pursued in ways commensurate with the actual physical crime committed. In the case of the life-threatening knife attack on Showan Shattak, anti-racists complained that 'the Nazis had been clearly searching for potential victims the entire evening' and that if the police had acted with foresight they could have prevented the attempted murder. When the *Aftonbladet* newspaper reported that Swedish prime minister Fredrik Reinfeldt was 'too busy' to comment on the attack, campaigners started the hashtag on Twitter 'Where is Reinfeldt' and, mindful of an approaching media storm, a prime ministerial statement condemning the racism that 'dirties Sweden' was duly issued.²⁸

The Swedish Security Service (*Säkerhetspolisen* – Säpo), for its part, seems to regard terrorism as a foreign import. Arun Kundnani locates this as the prime reflex response of western intelligence agencies which regard terrorism



Stieg Larsson, the world famous author of the Millennium crime series and co-founder of Expo, uncovered many fascist terror plots in the 1990s.

as an 'external ideological extrusion' rooted in an 'alien culture' inserted into 'an essentially benign western cultural space'.²⁹ When Säpo were asked why they were not pursuing fascists travelling to Ukraine the reply was that 'the security service is only interested in Swedes that travel to take part in terror-related activities in other countries, like al-Qaeda inspired groups in Syria'.³⁰ The security services' complacent response to the Ukraine-bound volunteers (who will, after all, return to Sweden with considerable weapons skills), and to the Swedes linked to Golden Dawn, seems to be a mirror-image of its earlier failure to react to the threat posed by the neo-nazi groups behind the 1997 assassinations of police officers Boren and Karlström (see Appendix, page 12). Stieg Larsson, the world famous author of the Millennium crime series, then an investigative journalist on Expo, revealed that one of the killers, Jackie Arklöv, had acted as a mercenary in Croatia during the Yugoslav wars and was convicted there of carrying out war crimes in Bosnia.³¹ Serving as a prison camp guard in Gabela and Grabovina, he tortured and abused



Muslim prisoners, including a pregnant mother who was battered with a water hose, forced to suck a gun barrel and threatened with having the foetus cut out of her belly. He served just one year of a thirteen-year sentence for war crimes, before being exchanged under a Red Cross programme for Bosnian Croat prisoners and returned to Sweden where he was arrested and spent two months in prison. At that time he was freed after the Swedish prosecutor decided there were 'no grounds' for a trial.³²

Civil society responds with anti-racism

In the last two years, a number of anti-racist justice campaigns have emerged to support victims of racist violence. By putting the facts into the public arena, they aim to provoke a larger debate about state and media frameworks



Soraya Post, who represents the Feminist Initiative, is the first Swedish Roma to sit in the European Parliament. (Photo: Stand Together Against Hate)

that may encourage prejudice and thereby legitimise violence. An assault in August 2013 in Farsta, just outside Stockholm, on a pregnant, veiled Muslim woman who had her head bashed against a car, led to the Facebook campaign 'Hijab Outcry'. The campaign had support from prominent public figures for its demands for action to end violence against veiled women as well as the lifting of the employment ban by the public broadcaster SVT, which had stipulated that no veiled woman could read the news. Attacks on a mosque in Fittja in November 2013, and on the central mosque in Stockholm in January 2014, led to expressions of support from leaders of other religious communities, who also say they are experiencing an upsurge of attacks. Omar Mustafa, president of the Islamic Association of Sweden, commented that 'the vast majority of Muslim congregations who become victims choose to remain silent' for fear of being seen to 'provoke new hate crimes'.³³

Meanwhile, anti-fascism is emerging as a key value in broad swathes of society. The Feminist Initiative (*Feministiskt initiativ, Fi*), which campaigned on the slogan 'Out with Racists

and In with Feminists', won 5 per cent of the vote in the EU elections, sending Soraya Post, a 57-year-old mother of four, as the first Swedish Roma to sit in the European Parliament. The Fi was riding on a wave of anti-racist activism, not just amongst young idealistic anti-fascists, but across the professional classes and within the public sector, too. Whenever the SD attempt to visit schools and other public sector organisations, they now face opposition. In March 2014, staff at a geriatric clinic in Umeå, northern Sweden protested after management gave permission for the SD to visit, with an assistant physician turning back the SD delegation at the door saying that their visit would upset elderly patients. In June, the education minister Jan Björklund was forced to deny that the government would allow neo-nazis access to the classroom after the unbelievable news was reported (that old tolerant cultural norm again) that the National Agency for Education was set to approve an application from the neo-nazi SvP to participate in a school civics programme to teach youth about the political system.³⁴ Prior to this, when the SvP announced that it would hold a May Day rally in Jönköping in southern Sweden, the whole town joined the counter-mobilisation. The local authority changed the welcome sign on the motorway to say 'Welcome to Jönköping and Jönköping against racism'. During the two-hour neo-nazi parade, the church bells rang in warning – the first time since 1939 and the outbreak of WW2 that its church bells have been used to warn of danger. But, once



When the SvP announced that they would hold a rally in southern Sweden, the local authority changed the welcome sign on the motorway to Jönköping Against Racism

again, the authorities took law enforcement to breath-taking levels by charging a local Green party politician with disorderly conduct after he briefly halted the neo-nazi parade by sitting in its path and singing psalms.³⁵

Then, against the backcloth of Swedish Democrat Jimmie Åkesson's European Parliament election tour, thousands and thousands of people, in towns far and wide across Sweden, took to the streets, literally turning their backs on the SD leader. Belma Puskar, a member of Together Karlskrona, told Expo that it was 'fantastic that this has spread so widely. Our message is that we want a society where we live together and everyone has the same rights.'³⁶

Bias and distortion within the government counter-extremism model

But what has been the response of the government to the upsurge in anti-fascist activity, particularly amongst idealistic and enthusiastic young people? The accommodation of the SD in parliament, the normalisation of SD racism and the subsequent rise in neo-nazi violence, are having a massive fall-out. Anti-fascist street mobilisations are growing. In the absence of police protection, the young in particular are eager to defend anti-racist values and overturn the cultural norm that tolerates racism. They are setting up blockades and defending public spaces. They are critical of the police's approach to neo-nazis and accuse them of passivity in the face of racist violence. Society is becoming more polarised. And the Swedish ministry of justice seems intent on managing and containing the polarisation, not least through a Swedish version of the UK counter-terrorism programme Prevent³⁷ that rather bizarrely ignores an evidence-based approach and considers far-left, far-right and Islamist violence as part of one single social phenomenon.

Despite the fact that Sweden has experienced just one deadly incident of Islamist terror – the December 2010 suicide bomb attack on a Stockholm shopping centre which left the Iraqi-Swedish assailant dead and two people

injured – the intelligence services, as already noted, have made no secret that their major, even sole, concern is the radicalisation of young Muslims. The ministry of justice, in its 2011 'Action plan to protect democracy against violent extremism' appears, at first glance, to be more even-handed and hence less ideologically driven. But a deeper reading reveals a clear institutional bias stemming from the ministry's stated intention to declare three 'similar social phenomena' coming from three destructive sub-cultures – Islamism, White Power, and the so-called 'autonomous' movements, as equal and complementary threats. From here, a clear bias against young people emerges as, without providing a shred of evidence, we are told that sympathisers on the Left and Right of the political spectrum share a similar generational profile, as 'anti-democratic attitudes' gain 'a certain foothold amongst certain groups of young people'.³⁸ From here on, the report (dishonestly) treats the far Left as a far graver threat. For whereas the far Right is narrowly defined as White Power (thus leaving out counter-jihadi and other neo-nazi and fascist trends, and most notably the SD), and evaluated as a decreasing threat emanating from a small sub-culture 'too weak to challenge the fundamental functions of our democratic system', 'autonomous' is analysed not as a movement but as an 'environment' hostile to the 'market economy'. The fact that there was no stigma attached to joining an autonomous group (as opposed to a White Power movement) was further underlined as a problem.

In this way, an array of activities on the leftwing spectrum was swept up in an all-encompassing definition of far-left (autonomous) violent extremism. Everyone on the Left was now a potential violent extremist: from anarchists to anti-war protesters, from environmentalists to animal rights campaigners, from supporters of anti-globalisation movements, to those who protest against the 'sexualisation of public spaces' (i.e. feminists), or those who hold 'anti-American sentiment' and 'strong negative attitudes to Israel'. (These incidentally account for 52 per cent of the world's population,

according to the BBC World Service's latest survey of EU countries, where views of Israeli influence are all 'strongly negative'.³⁹ It was such 'autonomous' actions, the report's authors implied, that posed the greatest threat to democracy in Sweden, because the violence of young far-left people (in contrast to far-right) was planned with the autonomous movement having the 'intention and capacity' to disrupt public order, target businessmen and entrepreneurs as well as threatened elected representatives, primarily from the SD. By the time that the government launched its 15-point 'Action plan against violent extremism', recommendations on how to counter far-right extremism had been targeted at the youth. No-one past their mid-20s, it would seem, could possibly be ideologically-driven or an extremist.⁴⁰ (Perhaps young people should retort that everyone past 40 is a cynical old reactionary!)

Since 2011, Birgitta Ohlsson, Swedish Minister for EU Affairs and Democracy Policy, who co-authored the report, has continued her crusade against young people, while attempting to appear more balanced by adjusting her previous assessment of the far-right threat. Her ministry faced some criticism after a government-commissioned taskforce, under the chairmanship of Eskil Franck, curator of the widely-respected Living History Forum, was asked to draw up a definitive National Plan to Prevent Violent Extremism. Fifteen experts on extremism were co-opted onto the committee, three of whom, Daniel Poohl (editor of *Expo*), the academic Heléne Lööw, and Christer Mattsson, founder of the social work project 'Toleransprojektet', subsequently distanced themselves from the findings published in December 2013. In a comment piece in *Dagens Nyheter*, the three pointed out that they had been critical of the approach followed by members of the inquiry, but their criticisms had not been included in the final report. For instance, they had all opposed the lumping together of all forms of extremism, pointing out that examining left, right, and Islamist extremism as part of one single generic extremism not only makes you blind to what is specific to each, but

prevents you from developing the right tools to combat each extremism separately. Poohl also harbours further doubts about the usefulness of the report and its recommendations.⁴¹ First, its narrow definition of political violence concerns him. Attacks on asylum centres are on the increase in Sweden, but this and other acts of racial violence are not being treated as politically motivated, he says. This means that racist acts carried out by ordinary citizens are excluded from the government's anti-extremism framework. And the focus of the report's recommendations on young people was also deeply flawed, Poohl argued, as it overlooks the fact that the ideological drivers of fascism in Sweden are generally older white men. He personally feels that the most dangerous generational category of men in society are aged 50+ – those who feel they are losing privileges. Many of the plan's recommendations were geared towards social work, with the municipalities expected to undertake much of the prevention work at a youth level. But for Poohl, the suggestion that the solution to extremism is the extension of an existing toolkit used by social services for those with social problems, such as drug addiction, alcoholism and psycho-social health issues, was problematic. 'It ignores the whole issue of ideology as a driver in violent extremism', Poohl believes. 'At this point ideology matters. The pragmatic part of the far-right extremist movement does not advocate violence but a whole number of intellectuals propagate the ideology. If you don't understand this difference [that it is not just about dealing with social problems] then you can't be effective.'

In fact, from the outside, the social service toolkit proposal looks remarkably similar to the positions taken by Swedish Exit. (See IRR report 'Exit from White Supremacy').⁴²

The alignment of state and media approaches

But what about Swedish anti-fascists? Given that the minister also wants European counter-radicalisation schemes to embrace the Left, is it far-fetched to imagine a scenario where

anti-fascists will be defined in the same terms as neo-nazis (i.e. as victims, the lost sheep of a destructive sub-culture, this time anti-racist, presuming the government to be neutral or non-racist)? As such, they would be invited to join an Exit programme, where they will be offered 'cognitive treatment' and 'thought-changing' processes that examine their 'grievances' and not their 'ideology'.

As yet, there are few indicators that the ministry views anti-fascists as 'lost sheep'; on the contrary, all the signs suggest a hardening of attitudes, particularly amongst the police and judiciary. The media are also taking a rigid approach, isolating anti-racists from the airwaves by characterising them as party political and ideologically driven or describing anti-fascist protests as examples of left-wing extremism, often twisting the facts on the ground. Quite clearly, the media are echoing the government's approach to countering extremism.

Already, in December 2013, the alignment of government and public media attitudes could be seen in the decision taken by Sweden's main radio station to restrict the broadcasting of a hip-hop song recorded by the popular and award-winning musician Timbuktu (aka Jason Diakit ) because it attacked the leader of the SD and contained the words 'Jimmie blue and yellow, hoist him on the flagpole'. (The Swedish expression 'blue and yellow' is the equivalent of the English colloquialism 'black and blue', but the added nuance is that the same colours are also those of the Swedish flag). In an op-ed entitled 'A harsh political climate demands harsh words', Timbuktu defended his lyrics as 'pure and simply a play on words', 'permissible' and 'necessary' in the arts.⁴³

Even before that, an incident in S dermalm in November 2013 when a 60-year-old woman threw a cream cake at Jimmie  kesson had drawn a disproportionate, some might say hysterical response. A woman approaching pensionable age had joined the ranks of Sweden's most dangerous extremists! Much of the media reported what was after all, alongside the

throwing of eggs, a traditional act of shaming in western culture (like the throwing of shoes in the Arab world) as a major threat to democracy. Members of Left parties found themselves unable to talk about any other subjects when interviewed in the press, until they denounced the woman and distanced themselves from her actions. Politicians began to talk of a violent tendency not being confined to fascists but spreading 'across the political spectrum', with acts (such as the physical assault by neo-nazis on a 16-year old child which had left her too scared to leave her home) compared to the throwing of a cream cake at a hardened adult politician whose trademark was racist provocation. In the final analysis, when counter-extremism frameworks are incorporated into news reporting they serve to render reality banal, as all actions, in Zygmunt Bauman's words, are detached from the material circumstances that provoke them, as the past is transformed into a 'container full of colourful or colourless, appetizing or insipid bits ... all floating ... with the same specific gravity; a container amenable to ... chance dipping – allowing for endless permutations but devoid of any logic of its own, and its own hierarchy of importance.'⁴⁴

Stop the normalisation of racism

But the relationship between the media and sections of the anti-fascist movement soured even further a month later. In December 2013, a peaceful local community protest against the increasing presence of neo-nazis in the Stockholm neighbourhood of K rrtorp was ambushed by thugs from the Swedish Resistance Movement, who had armed themselves with bottles, torches and firecrackers. (Initially, there were reports that some of the fascists had knives and that two anti-fascists had been hospitalised with stab wounds).⁴⁵ Despite police having received a tip-off that neo-nazis planned to attack the demonstrators from Linje 17 mot rasism (named after the local metro station), the information was not passed to local police and only six officers were present at the time the attack took place.⁴⁶ The locals, who included the elderly, children and mothers

with prams, were terrified. As they fled the scene, militant young anti-fascists fought with the nazis and forced them to retreat. Despite these facts, state television and the mainstream newspapers, including *Dagens Nhyeter*, presented the fascist attack as a gang fight, a battle between two equally violent groups. When a short film later emerged on YouTube that established the facts of the violence beyond any doubt, and caught the terror of its victims, the media momentarily changed tune. As the film went viral, tens of thousands of people protested against fascism across the nation, the biggest anti-fascist mobilisations since the 1990s.

Self-defence could be a legitimate legal defence in such a situation. But one of the militant anti-fascists, who has now been sentenced to seven years in prison for attempted murder, went further. He drew a knife and stabbed one of the fascists in the back. Few in Sweden have characterised the action of the young man, who for legal reasons is known only as Joel, as an act of legitimate self-defence. Yet there are many who feel uneasy that the prosecutor refused to accept provocation as an argument for mitigation in sentencing. And the harsh sentence (in the Swedish context) handed down to Joel has been compared to the lenient sentences (many a matter of months or community service) handed down by the same prosecutor to the neo-nazis who instigated the violence, some of whom have now evaded arrest by leaving the country, perhaps for Ukraine.

Not much chance of the cuddly counter-radicalisation approach for anti-fascists then! But then, the Swedish state can hardly endorse an anti-racist critique that clearly situates *it* as complicit in the growth of far-right extremism. Now, Line Mot 17 Against Racism have found a novel way of getting its message across. In a terse YouTube film, entitled 'We Are Sweden 2014 – Stop Normalising Racism'⁴⁷ anti-racists and feminists, including Timbuktu, Gudrun Schyman (now leader of the Feminist Initiative, she was the victim of an attempted hand-grenade attack in the 1990s), the actor and writer



Gudrun Schyman, now leader of the Feminist Initiative, was the victim of an attempted hand grenade attack in the 1990s.

Lo Kauppi, and Mona Sahlin, address the government, the police, the Prosecutor and the media. They say they are fed up with being threatened by fascists, and fed up with being labelled extremists, and they want all the violence and slander to stop. Perhaps Birgitta Ohlsson should rethink a strategy based on touring Europe to proselytise about the success of Sweden's counter-radicalisation schemes and Exit programmes. Maybe she should spend more time in the suburbs of Sweden, hanging out with young anti-racists who represent the country's future; listening is a skill which benefits from regular practice.

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APPENDIX

Background and facts on far-right violence in Sweden

We have already referred to Sweden's international reputation for race-hate material and exports of White Power music in the 1990s. But the fascist Sweden Democrats (SD), as well as the rightwing populist New Democrats, were at that time making small electoral gains, and the anti-racist/anti-fascist organisation Stoppa Rasismen had been formed to counter them.

Bomb attacks, attempted assassinations, murder

In the 1990s, Sweden's openly violent organisations – the Reich Front, the Storm Network, Nationalist Socialist Front and White Aryan Resistance – were attacking asylum centres in Sweden and sending makeshift bombs to anti-fascists. In September 1991, the local government offices in Gothenburg were subjected to a bomb attack and on 30 December, a more sophisticated bomb with a timer was planted in a locker at Stockholm railway station, days after a Turkish-owned restaurant was bombed by nazis demanding the release from prison of fascists connected to the VAM/Storm network.⁴⁸ In 1993 – in the same year that the so-called Laser Man John Ausonius, stood trial for the killing of one immigrant and wounding of ten others – a bomb was placed (but failed to explode) at the site of an anti-fascist rally in Stockholm.⁴⁹ At a public rally in the summer of that year, the leader of the Left party, Gudrun Schyman (who now leads the Feminist Initiative), narrowly escaped an attack by a neo-nazi linked to the Reich Front who approached her carrying a hand grenade.⁵⁰ Two members of the SD set fire to a mosque in Trollhätten and the nazi rock band Ultima Thule made it to number two in the hit parade.⁵¹

In 1995, 22-year-old African refugee Gerard Gbeye was stabbed to death by young neo-nazis from the Reich Front in Klippan, north of Malmö.⁵² This was the same year that a youth project for skinheads – the forerunner

of today's Exit programme – financed at that time by Stockholm City Council and backed by the Social Democrat politician Anders Carlberg, who believed that skinheads definitely 'not racists', but 'fine lads' propagating a 'positive nationalism'⁵³ first came to prominence for all the wrong reasons. The mutilated body of Anders Gustavsson, a 16-year-old boy who had been to a New Year's Eve party at the Fryshuset, was found in an abandoned warehouse close-by. The boy had been stabbed several dozen times and, after he died, his right hand had been cut off and removed.⁵⁴ In 1996, two neo-nazis were caught making a bomb at the skinheads' club within the Fryshuset and Stockholm police came under fire for failing to offer protection to the Expo Foundation when it came under concerted attack.⁵⁵ In 1997, a cache of explosives and ten bombs were found at the headquarters of the National Alliance, a library in Linköping was burnt down (an immigration bureau was situated in the same building), the leader of the Aryan Brotherhood was arrested for posting a letter-bomb to the minister of justice⁵⁶ and two neo-nazis attempted to bomb a school in Mora which was due to hold a lecture on the Holocaust.⁵⁷

But 1999 was the worst year on record. Three men associated with the National Socialist Front (NSF) shot dead two policemen, Olov Boren and Robert Karlström, following a botched robbery in Kisa, 250km north-east of Stockholm.⁵⁸ Two young members of the Nordland Resistance were arrested after a store of weapons, including arms stolen from a military depot, were found in a holiday cottage in Värmdö, south-east Stockholm.⁵⁹ This was the year, too, when investigative journalist, Peter Karlsson and his 8-year-old son had to be airlifted for surgery after miraculously surviving a car bomb attack outside their home in Stockholm.⁶⁰ Karlsson and his wife, who were leading experts on the White Power music scene, had repeatedly warned the police that their lives were in danger. Then, on 23 October 1999, trade unionist Björn Söderberg was assassinated on the doorstep of his apartment in the Stockholm suburb of Satra.⁶¹ On New Year's Day 2000, Salih Uzel, a 19-year-old Swede of

Turkish origin, was stabbed to death by a gang of skinheads in a town near Stockholm.⁶²

Criticisms of the police and intelligence service

During this period, not much thought was given to the victims of the neo-nazis' 'positive nationalism'. In fact, the 1990s proved a tough environment for them, as the tendency to see white neo-nazis as social victims was not extended to the children of immigrants who were often treated very harshly by the criminal justice system. The national auditing group for the police accused the police service in the Skåne region of a blatant failure to deal with racially motivated crime. A 1997 investigation by the newspaper *Aftonbladet* found evidence of bias in sentencing. When white men admitted that racism was a motivating factor in a serious assault involving bodily harm, they would be charged with lesser offences and receive lighter punishments than immigrants who were often charged with attempted murder for the same offence, irrespective of the motive.⁶³

Some wondered what the intelligence services' weak response to fascist terror signified – and in retrospect, and given all we know from the NSU scandal about the nature of covert policing in Germany in the 1990s, we should be asking far more questions about other European security services' failure to deal with the terror that was perpetuated two decades ago, that left countless victims maimed or dead, and many young immigrants, who fought back, criminalised. After the bomb attack on Peter Karlsson and his son, the chief of the security police Säpo insisted that neo-nazi violence was a minor problem effectively under control, leading to consternation from other police officers who stated that while they continually asked Säpo for information about nazis in relation to criminal investigations, they rarely, if ever, received an answer and then certainly not anything useful.⁶⁴ At that time some wondered whether the *Dagens Nyheter* newspaper was taking a leaf out of the far Right's book after it repeated smears circulated on the internet against Karlsson and his

wife, suggesting that they were not genuine journalists but members of Anti-Fascist Action. The newspaper had made similar accusations in 1996 against Expo journalists, after its offices were the target of a nazi terror and intimidation campaign.⁶⁵

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- 1 The term was used by the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* to distinguish the Sweden Democrats from the boneheads of the White Aryan Resistance (VAM) which, according to *Searchlight*, provided security when the SD led the 1992 annual gathering to commemorate the death of Sweden's fourteenth century warrior king, Karl XII.
- 2 See 'Sweden's year of violence', *Searchlight* (February 1992), p.17.
- 3 Sweden's neo-nazis were at that time deeply influenced by William Luther Pierce's *The Turner Diaries*, and sought to emulate the activities of 'The Order', which attempted to bankroll an Aryan revolution through murder, robbery, counterfeiting and the bombing of a synagogue.
- 4 Not least through its chilling 2010 election broadcast in which veiled, dark-skinned women trampled over frail, white pensioners in the rush to the front of the welfare queue.
- 5 See <https://www.svenskarnasparti.se/punktprogram/>.
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- 16 For a study of the content of avpixlat.info, see Katrina Hirvonen, 'Sweden: when hate becomes the norm', *Race & Class* (Vol. 55, No. 1, 2013).
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Stanley Cohen links the development of blind spots to cultural repression, tacitly denied information, and the histories that the state prefers not to be known. In the Swedish context, he points out that from 1935 to 1976, the state forcibly sterilised some 60,000 women under a eugenics programme to rid the country of inferior racial stock, but there has barely been any reference to the 40-year programme in school or history books. The victims included those with learning difficulties, those from poor families and those not from the 'common Nordic blood stock'. See Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial: knowing about atrocities and suffering* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001) p.156.
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- 20 See 'Exit from White Supremacism: the accountability gap within Europe's deradicalisation programmes', *IRR Briefing Paper* No. 8 (September 2014). <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/exit-from-white-supremacism/>
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