Frames of nostalgia and belonging: the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden

Gabriella Elgenius and Jens Rydgren

Department of Sociology and Work Science, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg, Sweden; Department of Sociology, University of Stockholm, Stockholm, Sweden

ABSTRACT

This article explores the ethno-nationalist rhetoric promoted by radical right-wing parties in Europe; its perceived threats against national identity translated into a nostalgia for the past based on ethnic homogeneity. Five anti-immigrant frames have been especially instrumental in attracting voters, merging with other central components to construct a potent master frame and structuring much of the mobilizing activities of these parties. This development motivates a closer look into the ways in which the ethno-nationalist message is framed and constructed, taking Sweden as our case in point. The Sweden Democrats entered the Swedish parliament in 2010, an election that has come to mark the end of Swedish ‘exceptionalism’ and pointing towards the resurgence of ethno-nationalism in Sweden too. The Swedish case is analyzed with a focus on the Sweden Democrats particular ethno-nationalist message; the rhetoric of decline of golden ages and solutions posed to combat these alleged processes of decay. We depart from framing theory that allow us to better understand the centrality of the ethno-nationalist message, which demonstrates considerable continuity over time, despite the modernization of party rhetoric. Thus, the exclusive conceptualization of nationality as constituted by an ‘inherited essence’, proposes that Swedish identity is more than culturally assigned. The empirical material consists of Sweden Democrat party manifestos and position papers since 1989 and selected articles from the party newsletter (SD Kuriren).

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 October 2017; Accepted 28 May 2018

KEYWORDS

Radical right-wing parties; ethno-nationalism; Swedish ‘exceptionalism’; the Sweden democrats, Swedish ethnic nationalism; frame theory

Introduction

The resurgence of strong radical right-wing parties and movements constitutes one of the most significant political changes in democratic states...
during the past decades. Radical right-wing parties share an emphasis on ethno-nationalism rooted in myths about a shared history and cultural homogeneity. Their programs are directed towards strengthening the nation by making it more ethnically homogeneous and – for most radical right-wing parties and movements – by returning to traditional values. The radical right also tends to accuse elites of putting internationalism and their own self-interests ahead of the nation and the people (see Rydgren 2018, cf. Mudde 2007). Overall, anti-immigration sentiments are the single most important reason as to why voters support the radical right (Arzheimer 2018). Five anti-immigrant frames have been used by radical right-wing parties: (1) to portrait immigrants as illegitimate competitors over scarce resources, such as jobs and housing; (2) by pitting the supposed costs of immigration against welfare state benefits that could have been used by the native citizens (i.e. welfare chauvinism); (3) to depict immigration as a threat to the ethno-national identity of the majority; (4) to depict immigrants as a major cause of criminality and other kinds of social insecurity (Rydgren 2003), and (5) in some countries, such as Norway and the Netherlands in particular, radical right-wing parties have framed Muslim immigrants as a threat against the liberal values of their countries (Akkerman 2005). The perceived threat against national identity has together with the immigration/crime frame been the most effective frame to attract voters (Rydgren 2008). These tap into sentiments of nostalgia, the loss of times bygone – of ‘not feeling at home anymore’ – and is translated into belonging in ethnic and national terms (cf. Duyvendak 2011). This motivates a wider interest into the question of how radical right-wing parties construct and frame their ethno-nationalist message, which we turn to below taking Sweden as our case in point. We analyze the ethno-nationalist message of the Sweden Democrats by focusing on central frames, and problematize its centrality in view of the modernization of party rhetoric since the establishment of the Sweden Democrats in the late 1980s.

Hence, our paper will depart from framing theory, which has played a more prominent role within social movement studies than within the study of political parties. We argue that framing theory has several strengths that help us better understand party politics, including the study of radical right-wing parties. First, in comparison to the concept of ideology, which is believed to be a more stable, persistent, coherent, and all-compassing system of beliefs and political claims, frames are more specific and can more easily be used strategically by political actors. As a result, they are not necessary stable, nor are the set of
frames used by political actors always internally coherent. Second, we follow Sartori (1976) in arguing that political ideologies are usually not of direct importance if the aim is to understand voting behavior. What primarily matters is the party image, that is, a simplified image or representation of what a particular party represents. A party image could even be condensed into a few words or slogans (Sartori 1976: 329). For the radical right-wing parties, such a party image could be summed up as, for example, ‘defenders of the native culture of this nation’ or ‘against immigration’. However, party images do not come about by happenstance, but are shaped by strategic actions of political actors that try to construct images of the own party which they think will help them mobilize voters, while at the same time trying to impose negative party images on competing parties. We argue that a focus on frames help us close in on the question of how party images are constructed. Third, as will be further argued below, framing theory helps us understand the ways in which political parties try to influence how voters understand and interpret the world. Frames provide a link between political articulation, played out at the macro level, and cognition at the micro level, and help us understand the process through which voters may shift weltanschauung in ways that benefit a radical right-wing agenda. This, in turn, is important for understanding the development of a deeper ideological attachment towards radical right-wing parties.

This article is structured in the following way: taking our point of departure from framing theory we first discuss the centrality of ethnic nationalism for radical right-wing parties in general terms, and how it combines with other elements of a potent master frame structuring much of the mobilizing activities of radical right-wing parties. Secondly, we briefly present the Swedish case and electoral development of the Sweden Democrats, before – thirdly – turning towards the analysis of their ethno-nationalist message as enveloped within various frames. The last section concludes.

The empirical material selected for this study include official Sweden Democrat party and election manifestos and central position papers on party principles and immigration (1989, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2011, 2013 and 2014). Selected articles from the party newsletter (SD Kuriren) are also included. The analysis is theoretically driven and the documents coded for relevant topics (see Charmaz 2006; Dowding 2015). An assessment of the modernization of party rhetoric over time is beyond the scope of this article and discussed elsewhere (see e.g. Hellström 2010; Peterson 2016). Notably, central shifts are roughly marked by
Jimmie Åkesson assuming leadership (2005) and the Sweden Democrats entering the Swedish parliament (2011) (see Bergmann 2017). However, the centrality of the ethno-national message is referred to through party manifestos and positions papers over the period 1989–2014.

Frames and ethno-pluralism

Following Snow and Benford, a frame can be seen as an ‘interpretative schemata that simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences and sequences of action within one’s present or past environment’(1992: 137). Collective action frames, employed by social movements and political parties, function as modes of attribution and articulation. They attribute blame for perceived social problems by identifying individuals, social groups or structures believed to have caused the problem in question (diagnostic framing); they offer activists and voters reasons and justifications to support its political cause (motivational framing); and suggest a general line of action (prognostic framing). Five of the most diagnostic anti-immigrations frames used by radical right-wing parties were mentioned above and link to various real or perceived social problems to immigrants and immigration. Motivational frames tend to be populist and/or apocalyptic: the ‘politically correct elite’ has betrayed their nations, and ‘the people’ need to act immediately or their nations will be irrevocably destroyed (see Rydgren 2018). The prognostic frames vary in scope and level of radicalism, but have in common that immigrants, in particular, those originating from Muslim countries, are seen as ‘culturally distant’ and their numbers should be reduced to a minimum. Given our focus on the framing of the ethno-nationalist message we mainly concentrate on diagnostic framing below.

Master frames can be seen as encompassing, generic frames that have the potency of constraining more specific (derivative) frames used by specific social movements or political parties. Master frames are of importance because they have the ability to synchronize, and in fact give rise to, families of movements or political parties. As Snow and Benford (1992: 143) show, the emergence of a cycle of mobilization is typically associated with the construction of an innovative master frame. In the case of the radical right-wing parties, such an innovative master frame was constructed in France during the late 1970s and early 1980s, and was made known as a successful frame in connection with the electoral breakthrough of the Front National in 1984 (Rydgren 2005). As the old master frame of
the extreme right contained elements of biological racism, antisemitism and an antidemocratic radical critique of the political system, it was rendered impotent by the outcome of the Second World War (Ignazi 1992; Rydgren 2005). It took the extreme right a long time to establish a new potent master frame that simultaneously met the conditions of being flexible enough to fit – in modified form – different political and cultural contexts; and sufficiently resonated with the lived experiences, attitudes and preconceptions of many people (see Snow and Benford 1992); and was sufficiently free from stigma. The master frame combining ethnonationalism and anti-political establishment populism met these requirements.

Radical right-wing parties in Europe prioritize issues related to national identity. More specifically, the new radical right builds on the idea of ethno-pluralism, an idea that largely agrees with right-wing ideas going back to Herder (Berlin 1976; Holmes 2000), and that in modern times was elaborated by the French Nouvelle Droite. The notion of ethno-pluralism states that in order to preserve the unique national characters of different peoples, they have to be kept separate; mixing different ethnicities only leads to cultural extinction (see Griffin 2000; Minkenberg 1997; Taguieff 1988). Yet, contrary to traditional racism, the doctrine of ethno-pluralism is not inherently hierarchical: different ethnicities are not necessarily seen as superior or inferior, only as different and incompatible (Betz and Johnson 2004; Taguieff 1988). By employing an ethno-pluralist ideology, the radical right-wing parties claim the right of European national cultures to protect their cultural identities. However, according to these parties, there are several ‘threats’ against their national identity, of which the alleged ‘invasion’ of immigrants is the most important. Immigrants from the Muslim countries are singled out as particularly threatening to European values, allegedly because they are the least compatible and the least inclined to assimilation (see, e.g. Zaslove 2004). Additionally, immigrants from Muslim countries are frequently portrayed as belonging to a backward, inferior culture, a rhetoric that, thus, marks a return to a more hierarchical form of ethnocentrism. A further theme of ethnopluralism is that different cultures and ethnicities can never co-exist peacefully. A peaceful society, according to the ethno-pluralists, requires an ethnically homogeneous population. It has been suggested that popular xenophobia and ethnocentrism that resonate with the ethno-pluralist theme have grown more common and important because, as Koopmans et al. (2005: 5) have argued, many people experience a loss of identity as a result of globalization. Since there is nothing beyond the
nation-state that can serve as a new anchor for collective identities and can renew the sense of control, people turn to nationalism to find such anchorage. This tendency has been stronger as class-based identities have declined all over Europe, which is a partial explanation to why radical right-wing parties have been able to make such strong inroads among working-class voters (Rydgren 2012).

More generally, profound macro-changes – most importantly, the transformation from industrial to postindustrial society, and economic, political and cultural globalization – have contributed to a situation in which certain voter perceive that their ‘old’ ways of understanding reality have become increasingly ineffective. This situation has been aggravated by a growing convergence among mainstream parties along the socio-economic cleavage dimension (Kitschelt 1995; Kriesi et al. 2008) and, related, by a partial de-politicization of this dimension (Rydgren 2005; Mair 2013). In a situation of decreased salience of the economic cleavage dimension, fewer people will make use of class frames in understanding the world and their being in the world. For example, for individuals experiencing a threat against their status position, a frame stressing clashes of economic interests between ‘immigrants’ and ‘natives’ may be adopted as an alternative interpretation.

Hence, the transformation processes of post-industrialization and globalization have brought about ‘unsettled times’ (Swidler 1986) and ‘the likelihood that cognitive and affective routines will be abandoned in the search for new interpretations of reality’ (McAdam 1999: xxxiii) has increased. Since established parties have occasionally been unable or unwilling to meet these changing opinions – or, indeed, unable to canalize or articulate the increased frustration by their political frames – significant niches have emerged in several Western European political systems. Sociocultural authoritarianism and, more specifically, ethno-nationalism and xenophobia have been the most important niches presenting radical right-wing parties with expanding political opportunities.

The Sweden Democrats and the ‘Peoples Home’

Radical right-wing parties in the Nordic context are defined by their authoritarian position on sociocultural issues such as the ethnicity-based nationalism, assimilationist and anti-immigration policies, discussed below with reference to Swedish case. The authoritarian stance tends to include law-and-order policies, traditional family values and a centrist position on socio-economic issues. Arguably, parties like the
Sweden Democrats, the Danish People’s Party and True Finns have converged ideologically despite departing from different historical origins (Jungar and Jupskås 2014).

The Sweden Democrats was founded in 1988 as a successor to The Sweden Party (Sverigepartiet), which in turn, was brought about in 1986 as a result of the merger between the Progress Party (Framstegspartiet) and the racist and far right political group Keep Sweden Swedish (Bevara Sverige Svenskt) (Jungar and Jupskås 2014; Lodenius and Wikström 1997: 124; Rydgren 2006). The Sweden Democrats originated, in other words, from an extreme right-wing milieu and was long viewed as morally and politically illegitimate by a large segment of the voters and by the mainstream parties. The fact that the Sweden Democrats failed to present a respectable façade is one main reason as to why Sweden lacked an electorally successful radical right-wing party until the 2010 general national election (Peterson 2016; Rydgren 2002; Widfeldt 2000). Previously, the Sweden Democrats only received 1.4% of the votes in the 2002 election, a number that more than doubled to 2.9% in 2006 and reached 5.7% of the vote in 2010 when the party won seats in the national parliament. Four years later, in the 2014 election, the electoral support received was as high as 12.9%, and has in recent years been hovering between 15% and 20% in the polls (Rydgren and van der Meiden 2018).

The Sweden Democrats, in lines with other parties of the radical right, have shown some signs of moderation, repackaging and rebranding of their rhetorical message over time. For instance, today the party steers away from nostalgia of the 1930s, notable of members in the early party formation. The party also approaches doom and decay, threats to the nation, enemies within or without, justifications for political action, solutions to identified problems with more caution in official party literature, which has contributed to increasing the voter base. Yet, by polishing its message, the party has considerably ethnicized Swedish politics with a rhetoric based on ethnic nationalism and Swedish democracy and a contradictory promotion of the nation as an ethnic democracy (Elgenius and Rydgren 2017). With the ethno-nationalist message in mind, we argue that there is considerable continuity regarding the diagnostic frames used by the Sweden Democrats over the past 20 years, whereas their motivational and prognostic frames are presented in somewhat less radical ways. Central themes include the decline of the Golden Age, enemies and civilizationism, Herder’s legacy and the ‘inherited essence’ of ‘open Swedishness’.
**The golden age and its decline**

Golden ages are central for national movements as sources of political legitimacy, authority and authenticity that contribute towards narrating continuity against untoward change, crises or decline (Elgenius 2011, 2015). In doing so, nationalists construct a past (often of national grandeur) suitable of serving the political present. The discursive content of ‘golden ages’ include the need for moral guidance in a decaying present. According to Smith, this is a call to ‘return, at least in spirit, to these earlier “golden” ages of the nation’s history’ (Smith 2009: 36). Few radical right-wing parties wish to return to the periods they idealize (Rydgren 2018) but they gain direction for a political project to reconstruct an otherwise doomed future on the basis of these. Thus, their ethnonationalist claims are closely associated with defining the nation that once was, through a historical origin, cultural heritage and significant national events. In doing so, the nation is narrated as one continuous and unified community of people, despite the overwhelming evidence against such notions (Elgenius 2016, 2017, 2018).

The Sweden Democrats offers a diagnostic framing inspired by the reactionary conservatism of the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s with a rebranded version of the ‘Peoples Home’ (Folkhemmet), promoting nationalism as a discourse of social solidarity along ethnic lines (Billig 1995; Calhoun 2007, Elgenius forthcoming). The People’s Home may be described as a poetic term for the Swedish welfare state, or the period 1932-76 when the Social Democrats governed Sweden. As a political concept its meanings have shifted over time (Dahlqvist 2002). Notably, the term was used in Germany with the introduction of social insurances in the mid-1800s and later came to denote the subsequent welfare initiatives and the so-called Volksgemeinschaft of the 1900s, associated with parties on opposing sides of the political spectrum. In Sweden, the Peoples Home was introduced in 1912 by the conservative political scientist Rudolf Kjellen along nationalist and conservative lines pitted against the internationalism of the workers. A few years later in 1928, the concept was launched with new meanings in the national parliament by Per Albin Hansson, later the Social Democratic Prime Minister 1932-1946 (Bergmann 2017; Dahlqvist 2002; Hellström 2010).

The Swedish Golden Age, as portrayed by the Sweden Democrats, draws upon the Peoples Home with specific reference to the Swedish welfare state of the 1950s. Sweden of the 1950s is depicted as a safe place with a homogeneous population and a cohesive society – a
symbol of traditional life – that attracts voters with a conservative ethos. In the party’s version of the People’s Home, the close connections between Swedish democracy, Swedish nationalism and the Swedish people are emphasized since the early party programs. The authenticity of the golden age is portrayed through discursive correlations made between ethnic homogeneity, the absence of migrants, Swedish democratization and the Peoples Home (since SD 1989 e.g. SD 2011). The Swedish ‘success story’ and ‘extraordinary’ socio-economic development pre-1960, in turn, is depicted as based on positive correlations between homogeneity and democratization (SD 1994). In consequence, the Swedish golden ages of the 1940s and 50s are understood as a time of consensus about who the Swedish people were (SD 2011; SD 2014). Overall, the Peoples Home provides hereby a suitable and relatively recent backdrop for the overall direction of the party’s political project to reconstruct the past in the future:

through a combination of freedom and safety, individualism and community, we wish to recreate a People’s Home that to as high degree as possible is characterised by safety, affluence, democracy and a strong internal solidarity. This is the overall aim with the party’s activities. (SD 2011: 3)

Although provocative for some, the party rhetorically turned itself into the new party of the People’s Home (Hellström 2010) aided by a nostalgic vision of the past (Bergmann 2017). Further, a suitable past was constructed on the basis of Sweden as the cradle of democracy and democracy as a ‘hallmark of Sweden’ (SD 2011). The evidence to sustain such an argument span centuries, and point in party programs to the Swedes’ alleged democratic superiority and ‘inherited human essence’, seen through the formation of early regional laws, the absence of serfdom (from 1350 onwards) and the Acts of Freedom of Information (1776) (SD 2011). According to the Sweden Democrats, the Swedes are in effect ethnically prone to democracy and equality, a proneness that link Swedishness to ethnic homogeneity and, in turn, to the national welfare state.

Having said this, the past is significant insofar as it enables the identification of the decline of the Swedish nation, crucial to this form of radical right-wing politics (SD party programs 1989 onwards). The decline is politicized as the end of the homogenous and harmonious welfare state (SD Kuriren 2015). Crucially, the goldenness of the 1940s and 1950s, the beacon of Swedish democracy, socio-economic wellbeing, homogeneity and cohesion, are linked to ‘the absence of foreign ethnic minorities’ (since SD 1989).
**Enemies of the nation and civilizationism**

The early Social Democracy is praised for the construction of the People’s Home and the Swedish welfare state, yet simultaneously blamed for undermining the harmonious welfare state and People’s Home from the 1960s onwards. The 1960s marks ‘the beginning of the end’, and the decay provides a core for diagnostic frames and a departure for the party’s motivational frames and apocalyptic rhetoric:

> Our national cohesion was undermined and the People’s Home started to march towards a disunited and violent society. (SD 1994)

The Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme (1969–1976; 1982–1986) is identified as a main villain and stands accused of ‘rabid internationalisation’ (SD Kuriren 1994: 8), allegedly to strengthen the Social Democrats at the ballots. The early critique was in particular harsh: ‘there has never been an individual who has had such a detrimental influence on this country’. His ‘senseless migration policies’, ‘eroded the Swedish nation-state’ and the glue that kept it all together (SD Kuriren, 1994: 8). The Social Democrats and the Liberals are both blamed for undermining Swedish solidarity and cohesion through the internationalization and multicultural values that they promoted. Along similar lines, the ‘politically correct elite’ is accused of letting Sweden down by embracing membership in the European Union, resulting in loss of Swedish sovereignty and ‘the national independence and freedom we held for centuries’ (SD 1996; 15). Over the years, the party has called for a ‘Sweden where the Swedish people has the power to decide for itself’, a Swedish parliament that constitutes the highest authority, and a country freed from interference (SD 2014: 20). The discourse of lost sovereignty and related discursive divisions about deserving membership echoes the call to ‘take our country back’ in recent elections elsewhere (see Bhambra 2017) and is especially interesting in view of Sweden also ‘being part of a European culture’ as discussed below.

According to Brubaker we are witnessing a ‘partial shift from nationalism to ‘civilizationism” and a shift driven by ‘a striking convergence in the last 15 years around the notion of a civilizational threat from Islam’ (2017: 1191–1193). Arguably, this shift has promoted a rise of an identitarian Christianism based on the contradictions of a secularist and liberal rhetoric, out of the civilizational preoccupation with Islam in the last 15 years. Civilizationism has come to constitute an increasingly important part of the rhetorical nexus of exclusion and compete with ethno-nationalism.
More generally, the resonance for anti-Muslim messages became enlarged after September 11, 2001, and in connection to recurrent Islamist terror attacks around the world (see Kallis 2018). In fact, September 11 can be seen as an important turning point in the rhetoric of the radical right – and in the resonance of anti-Muslim rhetoric. After this date, criticizing Islam abroad and at home has become the socially acceptable alternative to more openly xenophobic statements (Arzheimer 2018). As noted above, there is a trend for radical right-wing parties and movements to increasingly mobilize on the basis of both national identity and religious identity, defending what they call the Judeo-Christian identity against the treat of Islam (see Minkenberg 2018). At the same time, however, it should be emphasized that the radical right has continued with their exclusionary ethnic rhetoric – and in some places, also practices – also against other ethnic groups, such as Roma. Therefore, in view of terminology, we argue that these parties are appropriately discussed in terms of radical right-wing parties, rather than national populist parties, as they are primarily defined by the discourse of ethnic nationalism that also influence their populist elements; their concern about immigration, multiculturalism and the Islamist threat (Rydgren 2017).

The decline of the Swedish golden age, the subsequent moral decay of Swedish cohesion has been directly linked to non-European migration caused by the ‘strongly negative impact’ of immigration from ‘remote cultures’ since the 1970s (SD 2011). Non-European migration of migrants from ‘ethnically distant’ or ‘remote places’ has been singled out as especially harmful as per the general assumption that increasing cultural heterogeneity threaten the distinct Swedish culture, its common cultural roots and common collective memories (e.g. SD 1994; 2011). Moreover, the discursive content points towards ‘unrestrained immigration’ and the absence of an ‘assimilation strategy’ as generating ‘significant social, ethnic, religious and cultural divisions, with segregation, rootlessness and criminality’. This, it is argued, will ultimately turn ‘the Swedes into a minority in Sweden’ (SD 2007). Thus, migration, in general, and non-European migration, in particular, has allegedly resulted in decay and decline of social safety due to ‘high crime numbers, divorces and broken homes, abortions and low Swedish nativity’ in the early party programs (SD 1989; 1994; 1999). These claims are expressed with more caution in terms of avoiding the ‘threats posed against our national identity or against our country’s welfare and safety’ later on (e.g. SD 2003–2011). The decline of the golden age, increased heterogeneity, lack of
cohesion and challenges to Swedish culture, is central in justifying the main social threat as posed by non-European migration.

As Brubaker (2017) notes the opposition against non-European groups is constructed along the lines of ‘broader civilizational terms’ rather than narrow nationalistic principles. In the case of the Sweden Democrats, the rhetoric and discourse of Swedish homogeneity, culture and identity highlights the considerable complexity and contradiction of the ethno-nationalist argument: Swedish homogeneity is simultaneously proposed to be an integral part of the, European, Western and Christian cultural communities (SD over time e.g. 1996; 2011; 2014) and an ‘evident part of the Western family’ (SD 2014: 3, 21). The rhetoric of Sweden being part of a Western and European heritage has significant caveats: it includes Western countries outside Europe but excludes the Eastern European countries within Europe.

Although civilizationism has provided a platform for positioning along secular Christian identity, seen e.g. with the Sweden Democrats engagement in the 2017 Church election, a liberalist rhetoric and defense of gender equality, gay rights and freedom of speech has not been at the forefront but used to raise boundaries vis a vis Muslim migrants. We would argue that ethnic nationalism is still the core frame of radical right-wing parties in Europe – and not the least for the Sweden Democrats – and that civilizationalism for most radical right-wing parties is a complementing strategy and/or ideological current that sometimes is used smoothly together and sometimes causes some strains and inconsistencies.1

**The Herderian legacy**

The core of the apocalyptic rhetoric allegedly generated by denationalization expose a likeness to the ‘nationalistic principles’ of Herder’s (1744–1803) framework within which nationals have a right and duty to protect the nation’s peculiar culture and soul. These arguments are bound up with Herder’s cultural nationalism and speculations about the historical continuity of the national culture founded on its ‘spiritual genesis’. This genesis is constituted by traditions, customs and cultural ways transmitted by language from older to younger generations, who have a duty to carry on the culture of their ancestors. It is through the national language, as the chief medium of historical transmission of a community, the Volk and its distinct and persistent

---

1However, there is some variation across radical right-wing parties. In our view, Brubaker (2017) is drawing too heavily on the findings of the Dutch case (in particular Pim Fortuyn), which is not especially representative for the family of radical right-wing parties.
identity is both awaken and maintained over time: ‘language is thought, and can be learnt only in a community, it follows that each community has its own mode of thought’ (Hutchinson and Smith 1994: 105). According to Herder, some ‘mutations’ of original cultures and traditions take place along the way, as a result of reappraisal and revaluation and cultures, therefore, develop in different directions during different circumstances. Yet, this process of cultural transmission is considered an example of the ‘continuous spiritual genesis’ that relate ‘the living with the dead and with those yet to come’ (Herder in Barnard 2003: 121). In the recycled party rhetoric of the twenty-first century this is translated into the following:

The national community binds members of the nation together over time and creates ties between dead, living and unborn generations and between young and old, different social classes, political fractions and geographical regions. (SD 2011; 2014)

This rhetoric includes references to the distinct nature of the Swedish national culture too: ‘Sweden is the only place on earth we have an absolute right to be and to develop our own peculiar nature and identity’ (SD 2003: 6). From premises, not dissimilar to a Herderian framework developed in the eighteenth century, the Sweden Democrats have argued on the basis of a Swedish soul (folksjäl, SD 1994, 96, 99) moving towards the conceptualization of the unique and peculiar Swedish culture (e.g. SD 1994; 2011; 2014). In doing so the party pledges to revive and protect the latter as if to cure the nation from neglect. The historical process of nations contains therefore organic and even genetic attributes by ‘the virtue’ of generational transmission of culture and identity (Barnard 2003: 121).

What exactly is transmitted through the virtue of generations we may ask? According to the party rhetoric it is a ‘mutual culture’, common memories, language, religion, loyalties, elements that make people of the same nation recognize each other (SD 2003: 5). These elements are transmitted from one generation through the ‘inherited essence in every human being’, uniquely distinct for the nation and its people (SD 2011: 8).

‘Open Swedishness’

The early party programs described immigration in terms of ‘suicide politics’, through policies that promoted migration, internationalization and ‘islamification’ of Sweden (see e.g. SD 1989). The party continued to warn about the ‘dying nation’, its ‘terrible plight’ and the ‘dark future ahead’ in the following decade (SD Kuriren e.g. 1996; 2001; 2003).
Significantly, since frames used by the Sweden Democrats assume and warn about clashes between peoples with different cultural values and with people of ‘remote cultures’, these conflicts are avoided by these groups not living side by side – which constitutes a basis of the Sweden Democrats’ prognostic frame. In relation to the inherited essence of culture and democracy, exclusive by default, the Sweden Democrats introduce its approach to Swedish identity and nationality as an open form of Swedishness in the following terms:

... a person is Swedish if perceived by self and others as Swedish. In reality, this means a kind of open Swedishness and the possibility for people of other origins to belong to the Swedish nation. However, national belonging (nationality) is not the same thing as citizenship and to completely assimilate may take generations. However, non-Swedes can obtain citizenship as long as it does not seriously violate the nationalistic principle. As a rule, Swedish citizenship should be a privilege for Swedes. (SD 2003: 5, italics added)

The exclusive nature of ‘open Swedish-ness’ is introduced at the outset in the quotation above: Swedishness is defined by other Swedes and caveats are imposed on the so called non-Swedes by the binary introduced (Swedes vs. non-Swedes) but also by the discursive links made between non-Swedes and the violation of the ‘nationalistic principle’. Crucially, the two-way streaming of belonging – through citizenship and nationality – and the ‘inherited essence’ of nationality – introduces some kind of genetic transmission after all. Brubaker (1992) approached the duality of citizenship and nationality in the context of opposing French and German understandings of nationhood, developing in the aftermath of the French Revolution. In France, membership discourses were fought on the political rather than ethno-cultural axis, whereas German nationality, formed by Romanticism and the Prussian reform movement was of an ethno-cultural character and aimed to nationalize the state after its defeat in 1806. The concept of nationality came to embody notions that nations develop organically and as historically rooted through a distinctive national spirit (Volkgeist).

The rhetorical shift to ‘open Swedish-ness’ is one of recent years (SD 2003; 2005) as is the change of party symbolism (SD 2006) to a blue anemone from a torch in the Swedish colors linked to neo-Fascism and racial nationalism (via the Italian MSI and the British National Front). Relatively recent changes such as these have not altogether manged to eliminate the unsavory historic connotations of the 1930s. The implications of the exclusive nature of ‘open Swedish-ness’ runs through the
party manifestos about restoring authenticity, (ethnic and cultural) homogeneity and social solidarity by restricting immigration, in particular non-European migration, and by preventing multiculturalism. A prognostic frame is also apparent within specific proposals, such as those to criminalizing begging, expelling convicted individuals of non-Swedish nationality (SD 2013) and introducing repatriation subsidies to immigrants who wish to leave (SD 2015). Recently the Deputy Speaker of the House, former Party Secretary, Björn Söder, explored the implications of the inherited essence of Swedish nationality through his support for repatriation subsidies to immigrants who wish to ‘return to their homeland’ (Orrenius 2014). Kent Ekeroth, Member of Parliament, took such arguments a notch further (at a demonstration against refugees in Southern Sweden in 2015) by arguing that immigration constitute the ‘destruction’ of Sweden. He called members of the audience ‘a spearhead’ of the ‘resistance movement’ ‘to take our country back’ (Gasslander 2015). (We note that Ekeroth was not nominated for a seat in the 2018 parliamentary election). Recent articles in SD Kuriren make explicit links between refugees, unemployment and welfare dependency, and the inherit conflict between migration and the welfare state: ‘without change this may be the beginning of the end of the Sweden as a welfare nation’ (SD Kuriren, 2015). Arguably, such statements echoes, in part, the rhetoric of doom, a dying nation, its plight and dark future ahead (SD Kuriren e.g. 1996; 2001; 2003), although expressed today with more caution.

**Conclusions and contradictions**

This article has focused on radical right-wing parties and how they frame and construct their ethno-nationalist message, in general and through exploring Sweden as our case in point. We have highlighted the centrality of the ethnic nationalist message over time and how it contributes with other elements towards a potent master frame structuring much of the mobilizing activities of radical right-wing parties. The success of recent elections is a matter of successful framing and the ability to identify and synchronize the perceived social problems in question, blaming those responsible, and providing solutions. A rebranded master frame has been constructed that resonate with the beliefs of many but without the stigmatization of previous elements of biological racism, anti-Semitism or antidemocratic critique that characterized the radical right: namely,
the combination of ethno-nationalism and anti-political establishment populism.

Frame analysis does not assume the implementation of static or ready-made frames by social movements; on the contrary, effective frames are adapted to local or national conditions. Thus, although key ethno-nationalist themes used by radical right-wing parties go down a historical path and recur throughout our analysis of the radical right as well as the Swedish case, they take on particular forms in the case of the later. Having said that, however, the historical continuity of the ethno-nationalist message used by the Sweden Democrats over the past two and a half decades is striking especially with reference to the diagnostic frame. The implications of the former on the motivational and prognostic frames are also clear but in the case of the latter two, the ethno-nationalist message is expressed with more caution in recent official party literature.

Thus, in the Swedish case and in terms of diagnostic framing, the Sweden Democrats, identifies a suitable golden age, accordingly, with help of the 1950s re-conceptualization of the Swedish welfare state – the People’s Home – now a rebranded nationalist project once launched in parliament with civic terminology but unwittingly oozing of nationalism and organic solidarity. A useful past for this rhetoric is a past that contributes towards the rhetoric of decline, crisis, untoward change, betrayal and enemies: The politics of decline is, therefore, less about the past than about the present. Notably, the official path of Swedish nation- or state-building relying on Gustav Vasa (the King of Sweden 1523–1560 and builder of the Swedish state) has been disregarded because of its relative value in identifying decline and crisis in the present.

The Sweden Democrats accuse the politically correct elites, the Social Democrats and the Liberals and the multiculturalism promoted by them as having jeopardized the authenticity of the Swedish nation. Swedish nationalism is therefore offered as a remedy to restore authenticity, (ethnic and cultural) homogeneity and social solidarity. With the main aim to restrict immigration, in particular, non-European migration, and to prevent multiculturalism, the golden age of the People’s Home provides a clear framework of egalitarian proponents along ethnic lines. The construction of a Swedish Golden Age is therefore straightforward as a discourse of deservedness and, ultimately, membership along the lines of ethnic homogeneity. Swedish authenticity is positioned in the golden age of the 1950s, with a nostalgia for civic egalitarianism, rhetorically rebranded ethnically as a period of pre-immigration.
The implications of merging ethnic nationalism with Swedish democracy involves the exclusion of others on the grounds of an inherited essence of ethnic nationality rather than political citizenship, the former of a richer cultural resonance and with a biological retainer determining authenticity and Swedish identity. Ultimately, the inherited human essence proposes that ethnicity and identity is more than culturally assigned.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Funding**

This work was supported by Vetenskapsrådet, The Swedish Research Council [1369209].

**Notes on contributors**

*Gabriella Elgenius* is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Gothenburg. Her research focuses on nationalism, the radical right, diaspora and integration. Related publications include *Symbols of Nations and Nationalism* (Palgrave 2011), *National Museums and Nation-building in Europe* (edited with Aronsson, Routledge 2015), and on the Polish Diaspora and Civil Society (*Civil Society Revisited*, Berghahn Books 2017; *Social Integration*, British Academy 2017), and nationalism theory in *Writing the History of Nationalism* (Bloomsbury Publishing 2018).

*Jens Rydgren* is Professor of Sociology at Stockholm University. He is working within the fields of political sociology, ethnic relations, and social network analysis. He is the author and editor of several books; most recently he edited *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right* (OUP 2018). He publishes regularly in leading social science journals, such as the *American Journal of Sociology, British Journal of Sociology, European Journal of Political Research*, and Social Networks.

**ORCID**

Gabriella Elgenius [http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0862-0912](http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0862-0912)

**References**

Akkerman, T. (2005). ‘Anti-immigration parties and the defence of liberal values. The exceptional case of the List Pim Fortuyn’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10(3): 337–354.
Arzheimer, K. (2018) ‘Explaining electoral support for the radical Right’, in J. Rydgren (ed.), The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 143–165.

Barnard, F. M. (2003) Herder on Nationality, Humanity and History, McGill-Queen Studies on the History of Ideas, Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Berlin I. (1976) Vico and Herder: Two Studies in the History of Ideas, London: Hogarth.

Bergmann, E. (2017). Nordic Nationalism and Right-Wing Populist Politics: Imperial Relationships and National Sentiments, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Betz, H.-G. and Johnson, C. (2004) ‘Against the current – stemming the tide: the nostalgic ideology of the contemporary radical populist right’, Journal of Political Ideology 9(3): 311–327.

Bhambra, G. (2017) ‘Locating Brexit in the pragmatics of race, citizenship and empire’, in W. Outhwaite (ed.), Brexit: Sociological Responses, London: Anthem Press, pp. 91–100.

Billig, M. (1995) Banal Nationalism, London: Sage.

Brubaker, R. (1992) Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Brubaker, R. (2017) ‘Between nationalism and civilizationism: the European populist moment in comparative perspective’, Ethnic and Racial Studies 40(8): 1191–1226. doi:10.1080/01419870.2017.1294700

Calhoun, C. (2007) Nations Matter: Culture, History and the Cosmopolitan Dream, London: Routledge.

Charmaz, K. (2006) Constructing Grounded Theory. A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis, London: Sage.

Dahlqvist, H. (2002) ‘Folkhemsbegreppet – Rudolf Kjellén vs Per Albin Hansson’, Historisk Tidskrift 122(3): 445–465.

Dowding, K. (2015) The Philosophy and Methods of Political Science. Political Analysis, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Duyvendak, J. W. (2011) The Politics of Home: Belonging and Nostalgia in Western Europe and the United States, London: Palgrave.

Elgenius, G. (2011) Symbols of Nations and Nationalism: Celebrating Nationhood, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Elgenius, G. (2015) ‘National museums as national symbols: a survey of strategic nationbuilding; nations as symbolic regimes’, in P. Aronsson and G. Elgenius (eds.), National Museums and Nation-Building in Europe 1750-2010, London: Routledge, pp. 145–166.

Elgenius, G. (2016) ‘The principles and products of the identity market: identity, inequality and rivalry’, in G. Olofsson and S. Hort (eds.), Class, Sex and Revolutions. Göran Therborn – A Critical Appraisal, Stockholm: Arkiv Förlag, pp. 337–354.

Elgenius, G. (2017) ‘Social division and resentment in the aftermath of the economic Slump’, in S. Cohen, C. Fuhr and J. Bock (eds.), Austerity, Community Action, and the Future of Citizenship in Europe, Bristol: University of Bristol: Policy Press, pp. 39–62.

Elgenius, G. (forthcoming) ‘Deconstructing the history of nationalism: The cultural turn and post-structuralism’, in Berger and Storm (eds.), Writing the History of Nationalism, London: Bloomsbury Publishing.
Elgenius, G. and Rydgren, J. (2017). ‘The Sweden democrats and the ethno-nationalist rhetoric of decay and Betrayal’, Special Issue: what is going on in Sweden? *Journal of the Swedish Sociological Association, Sociologisk Forskning* 54(4): 353–358.

Gasslander, T. (2015) ‘Uniformalerade nazister deltog i SD-demonstration mot flyktningar’, *EXPO* 19 October. http://expo.se/2015/uniformalerade-nazister-deltog-i-sd-demonstration-mot-flyktningar_6952.html

Griffin R. (2000) ‘Interregnum or endgame? Radical right thought in the “postfascist” era’, *Journal of Political Ideologies* 5(2): 163–78.

Ignazi, P. (1992) ‘The silent counter-revolution: hypotheses on the emergence of extreme right-wing parties in Europe’, *European Journal of Political Research* 22: 3–34.

Hellström, A. (2010) *Vi är de goda*– *Den offentliga debatten om Sverigedemokraternas och deras politik*, Hägersten, Sweden: Tankekraft förlag.

Holmes D. R. (2000) *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Hutchinson J. and Smith A. D. (1994) *Nationalism*, Oxford Reader Series, Oxford: University of Oxford Press.

Jungar, A.-C., and Jupskås, A. R. (2014) ‘Populist radical right parties in the Nordic Region: a new and distinct party family?’, *Scandinavian Political Studies* 37(3): 215–238.

Kallis, A. (2018) ‘The radical right and Islamophobia’, in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 42–60.

Kitschelt, H. (1995) *The Radical Right in Western Europe. A Comparative Analysis*, Ann Arbor: University Mich. Press.

Kriesi, H., Grande, E., Lachat, R., Dolezal, M., Bornschier, S. and Frey, T. (2008) *West European Politics in the Age of Globalization*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Koopmans, R., Statham, P., Giugni, M., Passy, F. (2005) *Contested Citizenship: Immigration and Cultural Diversity in Europe*, Minneapolis: Univ. Minn. Press.

Lodenius, A-L. and Wikström, P. (1997) *Vit makt och blågula drömmar. Rasism och Nazism i dagens Sverige*, Stockholm: Natur och Kultur.

Mair, P. (2013) *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, London: Verso.

McAdam, D. (1999) *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, 2nd ed., Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Minkenberg, M. (1997) ‘The new right in France and Germany. Nouvelle Droite, Neue Rechte, and the new right radical parties’, in P. H. Merkl and L. Weinberg (eds.), *The Revival of Right-Wing Extremism in the Nineties*, London: Frank Cass, pp. 65–90.

Minkenberg, M. (2018) ‘Religion and the radical right’, in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 366–393.

Mudde, C. (2007) *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Orrenius, N. (2014) ‘Den leende nationalismen’, *Dagens Nyheter*, 14 December. http://www.dn.se/nyheter/politik/den-leende-nationalismen/

Peterson, A. (2016) ‘The institutionalization processes of a neo-Nazi movement party: securing movement outcomes’, in L. Bosi, M. Gugni and K. Uba (eds.), *The
**Consequences of Social Movements**, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 314–338.

Rydgren, J. (2002) ‘Radical right populism in Sweden: still a failure, but for how long?’, *Scandinavian Political Studies* 25(1): 27–56.

Rydgren, J. (2003) *The Populist Challenge. Political Protest and Ethno-Nationalist Mobilization in France*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Rydgren, J. (2005) ‘Is extreme right-wing populism contagious? Explaining the emergence of a new party Family’, *European Journal of Political Research* 44: 413–443.

Rydgren, J. (2006) *From Tax Populism to Ethnic Nationalism. Radical Right-Wing Populism in Sweden*, New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books.

Rydgren, J. (2008) ‘Immigration sceptics, xenophobes, or racists? radical right-wing voting in six west European countries’, *European Journal of Political Research* 47: 737–765.

Rydgren, J. (2012) ‘Class politics and the radical right. An introduction’, in J. Rydgren (ed.), *Class Politics and the Radical Right*, London: Routledge, pp. 1–9.

Rydgren, J. (2017) ‘Radical right-wing parties in Europe: What’s populism got to do with it?’, *Journal of Language and Politics* 16(4): 485–496.

Rydgren, J. (2018) ‘The radical right: an introduction’, in J. Rydgren (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Radical Right*, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 1–16.

Rydgren, J. and van der Meiden, S. (2018) ‘The radical right and the end of Swedish exceptionalism’, *European Political Science*, forthcoming.

Sartori, G. (1976) *Parties and Party Systems: A Framework for Analysis. Vol. 1*, London: Cambridge University Press.

Smith, A. (2009) *Ethno-symbolism and Nationalism: A Cultural Approach*, Abingdon: Routledge.

Snow, D. A. and Benford, R. D. (1992) ‘Master frames and cycles of protest’, in A. D. M. Morris and C. M. Mueller (eds.), *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, pp. 133–155.

Swidler, A. (1986) ‘Culture in action: symbols and strategies’, *American Sociological Review* 51: 273–86.

Taguieff, P. A. (1988) *La Force du préjugé. Essai sur le racisme et ses doubles*, Paris: La Decouverte.

Widfeldt, A. (2000) ‘Scandinavia: mixed success for the populist right’, *Parliamentary Affairs* 53(3): 486–500. doi:10.1093/par/53.3.486

Zaslove, A. (2004) ‘The dark side of European politics: unmasking the radical right’, *European Integration* 26(1): 61–81.

---

**Sweden Democrat (SD) election and party manifestos and other relevant literature**

SD Party and Election Manifestos 1989, 1994, 1996; 1999; 2014.

SD Position Papers (Principprogram) 1999; 2003; 2005; 2011.

SD Position Paper on Immigration or Migration Policy 2007; 2015.

SD Position Paper on Criminal Policy 2013.

SD Party Newsletter (SD Kuriren Nationalistisk Tidskrift) No 27 1996; No 43 2001; No 51 2003; 14 October 2015.