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Love in a Cold Climate

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The Swedish Theory of Love: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden

Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh

Translated by Stephen Donovan

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Sociology is often defined as the study of the relationship between the individual, the economy and the state, and the institutions and cultures that arise as a consequence of this relationship.¹ What holds this relationship together is usually called the social contract. The theory and the history of Sweden’s social contract are presented in *The Swedish Theory of Love: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden*.

The authors of *The Swedish Theory of Love* argue that it is the way in which the autonomy, that is the freedom of the individual in all their relationships, and which is guaranteed by the State, that produces ‘love’ (author’s emphasis). That is, to put it quite simply, the Swedish social contract operates on the principle of the individual and State against the family, ensuring the individual is never constrained by others, even if this is a family member or lover. This, paradoxically, creates the concept of *folkhemmet*, ‘people’s home’ or ‘family nation.’

The independence this then engenders between people creates love and social trust in society, as all are assured the same by the State. This state of affairs, Berggren and Trägårdh write, solves the age-old contradiction, problem of humankind: individualism and self-interest versus feelings of solidarity for others; in other words, asocial sociability. The authors call the Swedish arrangement, which mirrors this Kantian paradox of asocial sociability: ‘Statist Individualism’. In fact the introduction to this book (ix) is called “Humanity’s Asocial Sociability and the Swedish Paradox.” This, at least, is the theory, however, as we will see below, the ideal enshrined in *folkhemmet* has long since evaporated in the wave of populism engulfing much of Europe.

The security blanket that the Swedish state has in the past thrown around its citizens from ‘cradle to grave’, funded by very high taxes, was admired internationally and was paid for through some of the highest taxes in the world. However, Sweden became an international outlier,² if not a pariah during the first stages of the pandemic when it ignored the lockdown rules other countries introduced. Sweden’s public health body refused to recommend the wearing of masks; workplaces were kept open, and schools up to secondary age also remained open.

As in Britain, the elderly in Swedish care homes paid a high price for what now is accepted as recklessness by the Swedish government. Swedes themselves however acted responsibly

¹ This is also a definition of political economy.

² Berggren and Trägårdh refer to how radical opponents of lockdown in the US saw Sweden as a ‘libertarian welfare state’ because of the government’s original decision not to introduce restrictions in the face of the pandemic.

and stayed at home to work where possible and maintained social distancing (Frans 2022).^{3,4} However, the pandemic exposed deep inequalities in Swedish society as immigrants who could not work from home were disproportionately affected by the pandemic. This is reflected in the statistics on mortality during the pandemic.⁵ What this says about Sweden in 2022 we can deduce ourselves, however we can perhaps hope to learn more from Berggren and Trägårdh as this review progresses.

However, as well as demonstrating a perhaps unexpected aspect of the theory of love, and the social contract; the pandemic also perhaps illustrated the obligations as well as rights Swedish citizens have as part of the social contract. After all, the social contract is the trust people have in institutions and, more importantly, the trust they feel in each other (Trägårdh in *Nordic Labour Journal* 2021).⁶ We can further illustrate this concept through Berggren and Trägårdh's quote from Erik Gustav Geijer, who said movement between community and autonomy serves to strengthen each element (Rousseau is also employed by the authors to illustrate the tension between individual and community).

The approach of the Swedish government to the pandemic provides a useful mechanism with which to explore the theory of love and the Swedish State's approach to its men, women and children and elderly and I will return to this later in this review. Moreover though, the Swedish people's behaviour during the pandemic perhaps expresses the very notion of individualism and social trust.

North Winds Blowing

Admittedly, the description of the theory of love above not only sounds cold, but on first reading the theory actually sounds as dull as dishwater, or as exciting as Swedish meatballs in an Ikea store, not to put too finer point on it. Indeed, in much of the opening chapter of this book "The People of Nifelheim" (1-13)⁷ the authors conduct a literature review which seemingly emphasizes the perception of the cold individualism of a people who prefer being close to nature than to people, and ultimately, the suicidal,⁸ puritanical work ethic of the Swedes. In chapter 4 "Poverty and Progress" (53) Geijer and Almqvist are cited to emphasize these traits and indeed, the cold climate of the country and this is where I take the subtitle to my review.

³ <https://theconversation.com/did-swedens-controversial-covid-strategy-pay-off-in-many-ways-it-did-but-it-let-the-elderly-down-188338>.

⁴ Please see this journal. In fact, and in contradiction to the *Conversation* piece, it is argued Sweden's COVID strategy did *not* pay off, arguably harming social trust in the government: <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41599-022-01097-5>.

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/04/sweden-election-inequality-identity-covid-left-or-right>.

⁶ <http://www.nordiclbourjournal.org/i-fokus/in-focus-2021/theme-have-governments-lost-sway-over-the-nordic-model/article.2021-08-31.6798844903>.

⁷ See this link for mythology of Nifelheim. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Niflheim>.

⁸ The popular belief that the Nordic countries have an unusually high suicide rate is refuted in this article. I also provide footnotes on the authors references to suicide below: <https://nordics.info/show/artikel/socialist-suicide-in-scandinavia-a-historical-view-of-a-common-myth>.

However, the way Swedes actually conceive of love according to other literature presented in this book is much warmer and deeply rooted in a fascinating exposition of philosophy, religion, history, politics and fiction particularly through the Romanticist writing of Erik Gustav Geijer and Carl Jonas Love Almqvist.⁹ Indeed, the authors present a portrait of Almqvist's life in chapter 5 "Love and Independence" which is anything but cold and uninteresting.

The book is organised into three sections: "Anatomy of a Nation", which provides the theoretical and analytical framework for Individualism and the theory of love (hence the representation of these early in my review) "Sweden Imagined" which traces the 'unrealized' utopian narrative of Sweden (e.g. through Geijer and Almqvist) and "Sweden Realized" which presents the actuality of this imagined community through the country's institutions and practices. However, it is politics which must surely provide the context past and present for the authors of the book and for this review. This is because as Berggren and Trägårdh make clear in their introduction the social democratic welfare state image of Sweden is a misrepresentation of the history of this country's philosophical, historical and political back story.

Moreover, it won't have escaped reader's notice that Sweden has taken a lurch to the right in its politics recently, and although this was expected and in keeping with other European nation's move to the far-right,¹⁰ it perhaps shatters what the authors of this book themselves argue is a misleading image of Sweden as a social democratic and multicultural haven. Indeed, Berggren and Trägårdh argue that an age-old switch in politics akin to Mr Jekyll becoming Mr Hyde or vice-versa has taken place in Swedish politics. Perhaps a better metaphor, and one which this review subscribes to, is that with the ascendancy of the Sweden Democrats there is a wolf in sheep's clothing in power.¹¹ Thus, the contemporary political context makes this book more than an interesting read; it is a go to for all those wishing to get their heads round what seems a worrying shift away from democracy in Western Europe.¹²

Politics and the Politics of Experience

Perhaps a better and simpler definition of sociology, and indeed of all social sciences, is 'understanding the social and political world we live in.' Thus, attempting to understand Sweden's past and present is our task through reading this book which takes an expansive

⁹ Before conducting this review, I discussed *The Swedish Theory of Love* with my old Prof and friend Steve Fuller. Jokingly, I said I was thinking about introducing the book by saying 'Anybody expecting an Abba type love in will be extremely disappointed.' Steve replied that actually ABBA, because of the on-off romances within the band, which emphasize the Swedes' need for independence, were a very good example of the theory of love and perhaps therefore the Swedes themselves.

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-63029909>.

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/14/swedish-pm-concedes-election-defeat-to-bloc-led-by-far-right-sweden-democrats>.

¹² The heading 'North Winds Blowing' is inspired by this song by the Stranglers which looks back at the apocalypse of the First and Second World Wars, the AIDS epidemic and a coming event of similar magnitude. <https://youtu.be/fg-QbuMCpGA>.

approach which also includes the psychology of Sweden and the Swedes. Perhaps in doing this the authors take a reductionist view of the Swedish people; however, it is refreshing to read an account of a people—nation which doesn't shy away from an explanation of the cultural *sui generis* of a country as the authors in fact describe Sweden.

But what has given Sweden the reputation of a social democratic country and people, and why according to the authors is this incorrect, and what on earth has happened to allow a far-right communitarian party to assume power in Sweden? In thinking about these questions, I now want to present the authors view on this, juxtaposed with some independent research on the contemporary political situation, post the pandemic.

I should say at this point that book is inspired by the author's experience as Swedes who have lived in the USA and Germany, providing comparators to illustrate Sweden's difference. The perspective this has given them has highlighted the inaccuracies surrounding Sweden's international image; that is the contradictions at both ends of the political spectrum. The book is beautifully illustrated with the original covers of many of the works of literature covered in the text, as well with empirical charts demonstrating for example Sweden's ranking in areas such as social trust as compared to the US and Germany etc.

The study of individualism is in fact the *raison d'être* of this book, and also as the authors argue, the socialist State individualism Sweden has actually embraced in the recent past. So, what of current political events, how will this affect the Swedish arrangement or model? The coda to this book attempts to evaluate the real Sweden now in the context of the author's historical and theoretical discussion and looks to the future to assess whether the Sweden's State model has run its course. It is apposite then that the authors' arguments connect to the current volatile European and global dynamic. Firstly, therefore, I want to look at the recent seismic electoral shift in Swedish politics and how it reflects Swedish politics and society with reference to Berggren and Trägårdh's arguments.

A National Socialism Imagined: 'We Say What You Think'

It is argued by some commentators that Sweden's social democratic development under the Social Democrat Party is at an end (although they received the greatest number of votes in the recent election). Indeed, in direct contradiction to the arguments in this book it is argued that individualism or atomisation has developed in Sweden which is the result of a perceived disillusionment with government policies on immigration and crime, and which manifests as an antipathy towards the Other (Hinde 2022).¹³

It is argued, these are the reasons for the success of the far-right, neo-Nazi Sweden Democrat Party; although not actually the ruling party it will have a significant influence on policy the governing Moderate Party and the right-wing bloc of parties introduce. In fact, and as Berggren and Trägårdh show in chapter one "The People of Nifelheim" the

¹³ <https://www.france24.com/en/tv-shows/perspective/20220920-swedish-society-has-changed-the-rise-of-the-far-right-sweden-democrats>.

perception of Swedes as a highly individualistic people is well rehearsed in literature. For example, they quote from Abram Ottey's *The Swedish Race in America* (1940) in which he declared 'Swedish people are known to be individualists. Individualism is one of their defining character traits.'

Indeed, and in coinciding with Berggren and Trägårdh's metaphor that the Swedish State displaced the role of the Lutheran Church and acted as God, in that the Swedish people were, as individuals, able to communicate directly with it and it was the be all and end all of Sweden; the State defined Sweden and thus its people were able to divine all knowledge, sustenance and thus welfare from it (Hinde 2022, Berggren and Trägårdh), one wonders what the future holds for Sweden. The Sweden Democrat's mantra during the election was 'We Say What You Think.'

Again, somewhat paradoxically, it is argued this far-right coalition will form some sort of people's community—a *Volksgemeinschaft* no less with left-wing economic policies but culturally restrictive practices, although this perhaps would of course mean 'Sweden for the Swedes.' Indeed, in chapter eight (134) which is called precisely that there is a section that discusses the nationalist heritage of Sweden. I refer to this in detail below in due course.

Perhaps these arguments reflect the common misconception of Sweden as the multi-cultural haven envisaged in 1960s and 70s, and a failure to understand what the authors of this book present as the pre-existing solitary nature of the Swedes, and the role of the State, past and present. After all, and as I stated above, the view of Sweden presented by the authors of this book through a literature review of historical material is very different, with writers expressing the view that Swedish system was 'totalitarian.' Or rather, they would become so in nature, and the State building project only came to fruition in the 1960s and 1970s when a total welfare state was formed.

Totalitarianism Realized

The irony of commentaries that prophesised an Orwellian Big Brother-type dystopian welfare state in Sweden is obvious in the face of a country which has a newly elected coalition which includes a party with a neo-Nazi heritage, however much they and their fellow travellers attempt to normalize this through the media (Hinde 2022). The other irony of course is that Sweden is now facing off against Russia over the war in the Ukraine—it would perhaps be drawing a very long bow to draw a parallel between 2022 and 1939;¹⁴ although there is clearly another unspoken irony in a far-right coalition engaged in a war against Mr Putin's distorted ideological campaign in the Ukraine; although all is quiet on the Eastern front at the time of writing this review.¹⁵

¹⁴ <https://theconversation.com/sweden-has-broken-its-neutrality-convention-and-sided-with-ukraine-does-this-matter-189062>.

¹⁵ I am reminded of a song by the Stranglers called: 'All Quiet on the Eastern Front'. The song starts with the lyrics, 'Let me tell you about Sweden, only country where the clouds are interesting, big brother says it's the place to go, too much time to think, to little to do.' <https://youtu.be/P6XyOVRHGfK>.

So the question to be asked is were the writers that Berggren and Trägårdh present in this book, most notably in chapter two “Statist Individualism’ (16-33), arguing that the continuing evolution of the welfare state in Sweden would lead to exactly the point where a totalitarian dictatorship came to power?¹⁶ In chapter 8 “Sweden for the Swedes” we are told how a centuries old development of nationalism grew in strength with Sweden’s independence from Finland, Denmark and Norway after wars that resulted in liberation and loss under the yoke of foreigners,¹⁷ and that this narrative was based on the peasant’s revolt.

Another Blue and Yellow Flag and a Revolution from Below: Sound Familiar?

Berggren and Trägårdh (134) present the moment in 1935 on The Day of the Peasants Sweden’s Prime Minister, Per Albin Hansson mythologized the relationship between Gustav Vasa, who defeated the Danes and the peasants in the vein of a working-class movement that unlike in its European counterparts during the 1930s was socialist in nature. *folkhemmet*, simply defined as ‘the people’s home’ or ‘home for the people’ (17)¹⁸ became the Swedish conceptualization of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. *folkhemmet* is also defined as ‘people’s home’.¹⁹ It is argued (Andrew Brown 2018) that *folkhemmet* no longer represents Sweden because *folkhemmet* is also translated as ‘Family Nation’, and according to Brown (2018) and Hinde (2022) the atmosphere in Sweden now is far from family friendly (Brown 2018).

The ideal enshrined in the concept of *folkhemmet* is argued to have evaporated; the concept also expressed something much greater than just the ideal of the welfare state although the egalitarian policies of the social democrats in the 1930s which introduced free universal childcare and thus emancipated women,²⁰ perhaps illustrate the concept. Brown (2018) quotes a speech from 1928 by the Social Democratic Leader Per Albin Hansson:

In a good home, there are ... no favorites and no stepchildren. No one is looked down on. No one tries to gain advantage at another’s expense; the strong do not oppress the weak ... Applied to society as a whole, this would require that we break down all the social and economic barriers that now divide citizens into the privileged and those left behind, the rulers and their dependents, the plunderers and those plundered.

It is argued that social democratic reforms went too far too fast, for example, that the push by the late Prime Minister Olaf Palme to completely liberalise Swedish society coincided with an anti-establishment movement, that is the counter-cultural antipathy towards authority

¹⁶ Of course, these writers were thinking of a left-wing totalitarian State, not a right-wing one.

¹⁷ The history of Sweden’s flag can be found on pages 118, 136 and also via this link: <https://www.lifeinsweden.net/sweden-flag/>.

¹⁸ Berggren and Trägårdh (17) quote political scientist and future conservative leader Gunnar Heckscher, who in 1946 described the Swedish system in terms of corporatism in which people had become less individualistic and more oriented towards others and society.

¹⁹ Please see this article in *Foreign Policy* which shows how *folkhemmet* was an appropriation of the German *Volksgemeinschaft*. <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/09/06/swedes-cant-go-home-again-decoder-folkhemmet/>.

²⁰ Universal health care, free higher education, and socialized housing were also key aspects of the welfare state.

(237); that the waves of immigration, particularly the 2015 immigration crisis in Europe destabilised the solidarity previously felt in Sweden, and that an increase in crime was a consequence of the latter: liberalization illustrated to Swedes previously hidden hierarchies.

However, it is also argued that the economic crises of the 1980s and 90s, the inability to fund the generous welfare state, deindustrialization, privatization of much prized Swedish institutions, a movement to from the countryside to the cities all contributed to a deep sense of loss in the Swedish people who no-longer felt their country to be a ‘family’. The wave of populism and the election of a far-right coalition seems to have sounded the death knell for *folkbemmet*, but what have the Swedes lost exactly? Readers might have been expecting to read my conclusion now however it seems to me apposite to look at some of other political and sociological ideals that underpinned the original success of the social democrats and the Swedish welfare state. After all, it was Geijer and Almqvist who provided the narrative for the social democrats as far back as the 1800s.

Sweden for the Swedes: But What of Love Lost?

In returning to the literature that the authors of this book present on the essentialism of the Swedish people; the cold climate of the country and the nationalist sentiments that the nation was built on, Berggren and Trägårdh tirelessly present Geijer and his Gothicism as the creator of the peasant myth and Hansson as the social democratic visionary, who unlike Hitler steered Sweden towards socialism and not fascism (the authors write how in the 1930s Sweden had its own version of the Hitler Youth, 146). In fact, the authors argue that Geijer saw his project of liberalism as a pan European project but clothed it in nationalism (71-72).

What of love and emancipation though? So my reading of this book is that Berggren and Trägårdh present Geijer’s sociological construction of a future society via the peasant narrative which illustrates the patriarchal nature of that family institution, while Almqvist is presented as the progenitor of the emancipation of women, gender equality, and by definition, the theory of love itself, but in the context of liberal nationalism. Both writers refuted the idea that the Christian doctrine of love could be transferred to society.

In any case, I find Almqvist’s biography and writing more alluring (no pun intended) than the very expansive descriptions and analyses of how the welfare state was forged on a typically nationalistic discourse such as ‘Sweden for the Swedes and Swedes for Sweden’²¹ the history and obvious important of the peasants’ movement in Sweden (mythologised or not) is presented at some length. Indeed, in researching this book, the centrality of the peasantry is clear in historical papers.

However, what strikes me about this book most of all, and which I discussed above, is the emphasis placed on the ‘nature’ of Swedes and the climate of the country and how this affects their personalities. We could visit the pages on the Lutheran Church in this book,²²

²¹ The authors point out the ambiguity, potential contradiction in the implication of this statement.

²² See chapter 13, ‘A Lutheran Modernity’, 262.

and I'm quite sure the subject ties into the work ethic of the Swedes, secularisation of the State and the Swedes great ability to sublimate and their alleged concomitant predisposition to suicide,²³ although this alleged essentialism does seem to me to be inextricably linked in this book to the theory of love: solitude, a preference to be with for animals rather than humans, a loftiness, and quite simply, a desire to be at one with nature.

Love, social trust and, yes, sex is where I propose to travel, because this will get us back to where we started: the 'Swedish Theory of Love'. My argument will be that perhaps Swedes are not the cold fishes that I first thought from my initial reading of this book; although of course, the counter argument would be that love based on a particular kind of independence could only be found in Sweden.

Love and Independence

Carl Jonas Love Almqvist is a fascinating character in himself, and I urge the reader to engage with this aspect of the book particularly. Almqvist's writing is of most interest and the authors present the narratives, themes and sociological and political ideals contained in these works quite expansively. Almqvist was a member of the editorial board of *Aftonbladet*, the then organ of the liberalists. Almqvist's novel *Sara Videbeck* is of most import but can't be read—analysed in isolation. The authors also present Almqvist's *The Gristhamn Settlement* and *The Significance of Poverty in Sweden* and *The Parish*. Of these works, however, *Sara Videbeck* (1839) perhaps gives us the best insight into Almqvist's writing and indeed his mind. Almqvist's story of Sara, the main protagonist in his, at the time, radical, if not shocking work, centres on a young woman who throws off the social mores of the time.

Refusing to be chastened by relationships, implying promiscuousness, Almqvist presents an eroticised androgynous portrait of Sara, as Berggren and Trägårdh write, as an *animal coeleste*. The way this prefigured the move towards gender equality under Olaf Palme's administration was quite remarkable. *Sara Videbeck* sets out a feminist manifesto for women's liberation in the way the book sets out the view that to achieve true equality women should become as economically and socially independent as men.

Do the Swedes Love their Children Too?

Importantly, for the future of Sweden's welfare state, this would mean providing child-care for women and men. In *Sara Videbeck*, Sara struggles to run her own business while looking after her children. Interestingly, in *The Gristhamn Settlement*, the central male character makes room, although at a small distance for his elderly grandmother to live. The symmetry of this tale about the care the elderly is/was afforded under the Swedish welfare state is notable.²⁴ So, this portrait of early liberalism in Sweden illustrates the warmer side of the Swedes. Perhaps the love Swedes have for each other is shown in the way a system was developed to

²³ See pages 9, 106, 172, 232, 272 for references to suicide and the predisposition of Swedes to work even over their families, including arguments that Swedish women prefer to return to work rather than care for their children thus the generous child care system in Sweden to references on the 'drunkenness' and alarmingly high suicide rates as perceived by a US President.

²⁴ <https://sweden.se/life/society/elderly-care-in-sweden>.

allow people to express themselves as fully as possible as humans but within the constraints of an organised society.

The Clue's in the Title: Individualism and Social Trust in Modern Sweden

When I was considering how to conclude this essay I thought about my opening presentation on the social contract and how I referenced the discipline of sociology. I might have been guilty of indulging in poetic licence in my definition of the social contract, however what struck me as I conducted this review, was that we never used to talk in terms of 'race' or rather we never indulged in what I said above earlier in this review was a reductionist view of a people, culture or ethnicity, at least in my experience of studying sociology. I said above I found the way the book discussed the traits of the Swedes refreshing; however, I wonder what the evidence for the Swedish disposition now actually is. A cursory look at the evidence suggests that the Nordic countries which includes Sweden, are the happiest in the world, with high levels of social trust, at least until recently.^{25, 26}

However, it is no surprise given the copious sociological research on the relationship between economic crises, the rise of nationalism and the scapegoating of the Other in communities, that Sweden has seen the rise of far-right party that arguably defines *folkhemmet* as simply 'Sweden for the Swedes'. The war in the Ukraine following on so closely on the heels of the pandemic, the energy crisis, and pressures on government spending all make for a perfect nationalist storm. The notion that Mr Jekyll has become Mr Hyde or vice-versa discussed in the introduction to this review, would suggest that the nationalistic tendencies harnessed in the 1930s by the social democrats to maintain the individualism of liberalism but under the auspices of the welfare state, have been hijacked for the purposes of creating a xenophobic people's community.

As usual, a pretext for this is the failure of previous governments to deal with crime committed by immigrants. It is argued that the original immigrants who came to Sweden for work were accepted and to an extent, assimilated into Swedish society, but those that came during and after the immigration crisis of 2015 have not been, although it is argued the rise in gang crime that has been witnessed recently in Sweden has nothing to do with this (Hinde 2022, Trägårdh, 2021) and has simply been capitalised on by the far-right.

In fact, Trägårdh quoted in the *Nordic Labour Journal* (2021),²⁷ also argues that trust is still high in Sweden but wavers depending on the social and educational resources available in different regions, towns and cities. As always, poorer areas feel less trust and there is a strong feeling that respect for Swedish laws and culture are important. It is unsurprising therefore that the right should have capitalised on this, as they always do.

²⁵ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/davidnikel/2022/03/19/world-happiness-report-are-the-nordic-countries-really-so-happy/>.

²⁶ <https://www.cntraveller.com/gallery/happiest-countries-in-the-world>.

²⁷ <http://www.nordiclaborjournal.org/i-fokus/in-focus-2021/theme-have-governments-lost-sway-over-the-nordic-model/article.2021-08-31.6798844903>.

It is unlikely then that social democrats have turned to neo-Nazi ideology as though this somehow is the other side of a Janus-faced Statist individualism. It is much more likely that the ‘usual suspects’ (authors emphasis) have finally bought new suits and become media savvy (Hinde 2022). One can only hope the Swedish people remember Per Albin Hansson’s speech, quoted above, in which he said there were no favourites in a good home; everyone belongs.

Thus, in following this ideal, the hope is the Swedish people show the same love they demonstrated during the pandemic to all citizens of their country in the future. In summary, I hope the conclusion of this review illustrates for the reader the concept of individualism and social trust in modern Sweden and has done justice to this important theorisation on what it means to be a good citizen.

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