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Emulating Eton

The paradox of elite boarding schools in the Social Democratic utopia

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I: INTRODUCTION

In October 2011, after having received several anonymous letters, the Swedish *School Inspection* made what could best be described as a raid on the private boarding school Lundsberg Skola, a secondary school in the rural region of Värmland. The anonymous letters described a school where younger pupils were systematically abused by older pupils. The abuse involved everything from being hit with belts to being urinated on. One student described how he was woken up in the middle of the night and forced to do push-ups while the older students guarded him with baseball bats, another how he was beaten if he sat on more than one third of the chair or if he forgot to bow to the older students when he left or entered a room. After the *School Inspection*'s visit to Lundsberg, they confirmed the environment that had been described in the anonymous letters. In their view there existed an informal set of rules where the older students systematically harassed the younger ones so that they would learn how to "take a beating".¹ This system, or culture, was tacitly endorsed by the teachers, the Headmaster and the governing body of the school. Because of the severity of the violence, the *School Inspection* decided to hand over the case to the police. Given the fact that Lundsberg is one of just three secondary schools that are exempt from the Swedish law stating that no secondary schools in the country are allowed to charge tuitions fees (one year at Lundsberg cost around €22.000), this case attracted further media attention and public interest, which provoked plenty of questions: How could there still be privately owned secondary schools in what is, at least traditionally, perceived as a socially equal welfare state paradise? And was this event just a one-off case of sadistic bullying? Or was it symptomatic of a deep-seated culture of violence amongst the students?

From a 21st century national perspective, events such as the one just described appear as an anomaly and an anachronism. In this thesis I will therefore show how these issues are best studied and understood from a historical and international perspective, from which viewpoint these schools tells a larger story; a story of the cultural export of the British idea of private, character building boarding schools and the different ways the Swedish economic elite has been able to avoid the state-controlled school system through a small number of similarly exclusive boarding schools. In this thesis I will also argue that the violent events that occurred at Lundsberg in large parts should

¹ The description "take a beating" is from the School inspections report

be placed in the historical context of where this school's ideology were imported from, because these violent practises were not invented at Lundsberg, rather, they are the results of years of imitation and emulation of the educational ideology at the British public schools.

While this study focuses on Lundsberg Skola, which is the most prominent among the Swedish boardings schools, the study also includes the additional three boarding schools - Solbacka Läroverk, Sigtunaskolan and Sigtuna Humanistiska Läroverk - that were all founded between the years 1900-1930. In my study of these four cases I focus on how the ideology, or myth, of the British elite institutions known as the "great public schools" were transferred, adapted and received in the context of the emerging Swedish Social Democratic welfare-state. I will study what function these institutions may have played in the production, and conservation, of a Swedish upper class in a time of progressive Social Democratic social reforms aimed at eliminating socioeconomic inequality. I will also look at how these schools tried to import an ethos, fostering ideology, and social distinction from the prestigious British public schools (public means highly private in this British context), including Eton College, Harrow, Winchester, and Rugby. The paradoxical fact that an educational ideology, which was born in a socially divided nation of 19th century England, could be transferred and find a breeding ground in the 20th century progressive social democratic welfare state, makes this a compelling case to study.

Indeed, privately owned schools are an anomaly in the history of 20th century Scandinavian educational system, which are predominantly state-controlled. Therefore, the emergence of these private, highly exclusive boarding schools in Sweden must not be examined as an isolated national phenomenon, but as a part of a larger cultural export from the British Isles. The prominent British public schools have been described as the formative ground and "nurseries" for the British ruling classes of the 19th and 20th centuries. From the reforms of Headmaster Thomas Arnold at Rugby in the mid-19th century, the public schools evolved as a comprehensive curriculum and ethos that was inculcated into generations of upper middle and upper class boys and young men. The common attitude was that if you as a student can control and govern a boarding house at a one of the major British boarding schools, then you can also govern a major industry, bank or even the Empire. The progressive gain of power through the student hierarchy was said to function as a "crash-course" in leadership. The journey from subordinate to superior was supposed to give the student sharp elbows, stamina, and a social network consisting of some of the wealthiest heirs in the country.² So

² See for example T. W Bamford, *The Rise of the Public School*, London 1967

how was it possible to transfer and "translate" this ethos and institutional concept into another national context? Especially into the national context of the so-called socially equal 20th century Sweden?

During the first half of the twentieth century, with the National Pension Act, universal suffrage and new reforms to aid the poor, formed the embryo of what was to become the Swedish welfare state. In 1928, the social democrat, and prime minister to be, Per Albin Hansson, coined the phrase *Folkhemmet* ("the people's home") to describe his aim for Sweden to be a "good home" characterised by equality and mutual understanding. This marked the beginning of a Social Democratic epoch in Swedish history, in which the party had a majority in the *Riksdag* between the years 1932-1976 and 1982-1991. The political and economic development during this period has been called both "the Swedish model" and "the third way", referring to Sweden's middle way between communism and capitalism. This period saw economic growth and a number of reforms, such as free public health care and tuition free education at primary, secondary and university levels. Similar reforms in Denmark and Norway made the Scandinavian region the archetypical welfare state and an inspirational "model" for other countries in 20th century Europe, and beyond.³ The mere existence of elite schools in the so-called egalitarian Scandinavian welfare states has often been thought of as an oxymoron.

As mentioned, one of the key political questions for the Swedish Social Democratic party has been equity in the school system. Apart from social policies such as tuition free education, the party has managed to create a powerful narrative of a school system that integrates citizens from different social backgrounds. The image of a Swedish school where the son of a factory worker and the son of a CEO study side by side is very much used in the political discourse also of the 21st century. I would like to demonstrate that the son of the factory worker never meet the sons of the financial families such as Wallenbergs, Wehtje or Klingspor at school. Instead, their educational trajectory more reassembles the educational training of the sons of wealthy families in England, Germany or America. From the onset of the *folkhem* era, these children walked a parallel, enclosed educational path that stills exists alongside the tuition free schools of Sweden today.

During the first half of the 20th century, characterised by democratisation and social welfare reforms, four private, and socially exclusive, boarding schools where founded in Sweden.

³ For studies on the Nordic countries as a "model country"; see *Journal of Scandinavian History* 2009 34:3

The four boarding schools, *Lundsberg skola* (1896), *Solbacka Läroverk* (1903), *Sigtuna Skolan* (1924), and *Sigtuna Humanistiska Läroverk* (1927) have between the years 1910 and 1984 attracted ninety families (houses) from the Swedish nobility, including two kings of Sweden and the Social Democratic Prime Minister Olof Palme. These boarding schools have also been the choice of education for the top financial “family dynasties” such as the Wallenbergs, Wehtje and Bonnier.⁴ In Great Britain and in the USA, a small number of boarding schools have been described as important institutions in the production of a new capitalist elite during the 20th century.⁵ The mixture of old money (the nobility) and new money (financial families) among the alumni of the four Swedish boarding schools might very well suggest that these schools played a key role in the production of a new economic elite also in the Scandinavian countries.⁶ Therefore, I will also examine if - and to what extent - the private boarding schools in Sweden can be regarded as one of the key institution in the production of this new Swedish capitalist elite during the first half of the 20th century.

One of the main aspects of this study is to juxtapose the idea of the egalitarian Swedish society with the existence of these private and highly selective boarding schools. The grand narrative in standard works on Scandinavian history describes the educational reforms during the 20th century as “the emergence of the world’s most centralised and socially equal school system”. Similarly, Sweden is often described as a society where elites or social classes do not exist. I would like to make that picture more nuanced by showing how a number of Swedish elite institutions serve a comparable purpose in Sweden as the British public schools, such as Eton or Harrow, serve in England, that is, the production and conservation of an upper class. Although the Swedish private schools are few and although they have kept a very low profile, the small group of people who control a large amount of the country’s capital was educated in these institutions, and they are also well-connected with the international economic elite. An academic study of these Swedish boarding schools has never been done before, neither in the field of history, sociology nor pedagogy, and it is therefore difficult to say to what extent these schools exercised a meeting point for financial and political power. Were these Swedish boarding schools a successful way for the old landed aristocracy and the new financial “family dynasties” to maintain and improve their position of power? Did a “British” boarding school upbringing give their children the same habits, cultural distinctions and “way of life” as the children of the economic elites in Great Britain? Or can these schools be described as

⁴ Petter Sandgren, *Mens sana in corpore sano: En studie av Lundsbergs fostrande funktion*. 2009

⁵ For example Bamford 1967

⁶ Sandgren 2009

mere Don Quixote-institutions, a last bastion, were the subjective world-views of a “dying” feudal elite did not correspond with the new structures of modern times, with democratisation of the education system and more equal opportunities in most aspects of life?

The overarching hypothesis of this study is that British-style private boarding schools have during the early 20th century functioned - and still does - as a key institution in the distribution of high positions within the economic elite sphere, not only in England, but in such diverse countries such as the US (including the New England preparatory boarding schools), Switzerland (international boarding schools such as the Intitut Le Rosey), Australia (Geloong School), and the former British colonies in Africa and Asia. Although this thesis cannot capture the full extent of the export of the British boarding school ideal, this case study of its spread to Sweden will illustrate some of the larger structures, or mechanisms, behind it. And by studying the transfer of the boarding school concept, and the ethos it produces, we can increase our knowledge of the transnational mechanisms behind the wider phenomenon of how certain elite groups’ habits, educational strategies and way of life diffuse to other countries.