



## **‘New Gustavians’: Sweden, Europe and the Return of the Eighteenth Century during the 1990s Crisis**

By  
Andreas Mørkved Hellenes

### **Abstract**

The early 1990s saw Sweden severely hit by financial crisis, electoral upheaval and a swift reorientation within political elites resulting in an application to join the European Union (EU). Based on a case study of the Swedish blockbuster exhibition project *The Sun and the North Star* in Paris during spring 1994, this article argues that the early 1990s represent a key transition period for the renegotiation of the relationship between business, politics and culture in Swedish foreign promotion and cultural diplomacy. In a wide-ranging campaign launched in France ahead of the Swedish referendum on European membership, political communication, cultural heritage narratives, and export promotion were brought together in an ambitious national identity political project that showcased a new, liberal-conservative and inherently European Sweden.

**Keywords:** Sweden, public diplomacy, European membership, material culture, Gustavianism, nation branding.

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On February 12, 1990, French Prime Minister Michel Rocard informed President François Mitterrand of the outcome of negotiations for an alliance between the state-owned French car company Renault and the Swedish manufacturer Volvo (Routier 1993). Suspecting that Mitterrand was not keen to accept the deal, Rocard tried to sweeten the pill by alluding to Sweden's advanced social organisation and welfare state. The prime minister, who had happily voiced his personal affinities with Swedish-style social democracy, referred in fact to an old and popular trope in French discourse on Sweden: that of the *Swedish model* (Hellenes 2021). Indeed, when IKEA some years earlier had inaugurated their first French warehouse – situated in the Parisian “red” suburb of Bobigny – the opening was accompanied with an ad campaign depicting the newly elected Mitterrand inspecting a bookshelf, with the caption “Mr Mitterrand, we know that you are fascinated by the Swedish model, but why travel so far?” (Kristofferson 2015:86). Instead, the ad suggested, it was enough to go to Bobigny.

In spring 1994, the now well-established furniture giant sang a different song in its French ads, presenting a collection of Swedish eighteenth century Gustavian remakes as particularly well disposed for contemporary marriages between old and new interior design. The Gustavian style – referring to the architecture and art of the Gustavian era (1772-1809) – incarnated according to IKEA Sweden's way from rural periphery to European cultural nation, “the style of a Sweden which opens itself to the modernism of ideas and values” (*Cap sur la Suède* 1994:42-43). IKEA was not alone in returning to history during the early 1990s. During the time of the Swedish EU-membership debates, questions pertaining to the country's European or non-European past were omnipresent in public debates on national identity; used by Eurosceptics to defend the thesis of the Nordic countries' essential difference from those of continental Europe, the past was also mobilised as evidence of a Nordic belonging in Europe by advocates of membership (Axelsson 2006). In Paris, the Swedish blockbuster exhibition *The Sun and the North Star* – displayed first at *Nationalmuseum* in Stockholm in autumn 1993 and then at the French capital's Grand Palais in Paris in spring 1994 – presented an interpretation of history where Swedish modernity was largely a result of the Gustavian era's close contact between Sweden and France. The exhibition provided publics in both countries with a shared history, a timeline of French-Swedish *lieux de mémoires* made available and appreciable through material (high) cultural heritage and historical narrative. At the centre of a massive Swedish promotional campaign in Paris, the exhibition established the framework for a commemoration of an alleged special relation between Sweden and France, in a moment when Sweden's European ties were of crucial importance.<sup>1</sup>

The role of history for promotional purposes has with few exceptions been left outside in research on Swedish public diplomacy, which has focused

predominantly on the communication of “Social Sweden” rather than “Cultural Sweden” (Glover 2009).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the state-sanctioned “return” of the eighteenth century in Sweden is strikingly absent from studies of the uses of history in the Swedish EU membership debates (e.g. Stråth 2000; Zander 2001; Stråth 2002; Axelsson 2006). It has however been addressed by recent scholarship in art history, which has advanced that renewed interest in Gustavianism in the early 1990s emerged in line with a more general “heritage boom”, and it was employed both to confirm national identity at home and to promote Sweden internationally (Mårdh 2017). Taking its cue from this observation, this article examines two aspects of *The Sun and the North Star*: first, the exhibition’s use of historical representations to commemorate Sweden’s European past; second, the ways in which this commemoration paved the way for the re-branding of Sweden as a modern and *normal* European country. In so doing, the article addresses the complex relationship between public culture and public diplomacy. How, at the end of the Cold War and onset of accelerating European integration, were Swedish historical narratives reconceptualised and staged for foreign publics and to what purpose? By answering these questions, the article analyses the early 1990s as a key transition period for the renegotiation of the relationship between history, culture, business and politics in Swedish image production at home and abroad. In a marked turn away from the main tendencies of previous (and later) decades of Swedish public diplomacy and foreign communication, national heritage and history was in this period integrated in combined state and corporate efforts to promote Sweden abroad. In so doing, the article contributes to this special issue’s joint explorations of the Scandinavian early 1990s as both an era of national introspection and competition state transformation in light of Europeanisation and globalisation.

### Sweden’s Return to History and to Europe

It has been argued that by the end of the 1980s, the “Swedish model” had achieved the status of a “given frame for the image of Sweden” (Marklund 2015:182). This had ramifications for the post-Cold War period’s turn towards introspection and self-criticism. Where the assassination of Olof Palme represented what many would refer to as a “loss of innocence” on the domestic level, the end of the Cold War meant that the alternative, “middle way” position in international politics disappeared. Moreover, the early 1990s saw Sweden severely hit by a succession of crises. Importantly, the measures to fight the crises included the adoption of a new overarching target for the economic policy: it should no longer be to fight unemployment, but to ensure low inflation (Schön 2010; Andersson & Östberg 2013:357). Combined with the ongoing crisis, the results were dramatic, with mass

unemployment seen again for the first time since the 1930s (Ivarsson Westerberg, Waldemarson & Östberg 2014:19-20). This was, according to Francis Sejersted, “Sweden’s second Poltava”, the end of its industrial great power era (2011:479). The fall of the Swedish model became a favourite theme in foreign press coverage of the Swedish crisis; this foreign image was reproduced in dialogue with a number of diagnostic publications written by critics of Swedish social democracy, concocting imageries of sclerosis, winter and death. Meanwhile, the sense of crisis provoked a strong feeling of urgency over the question of Europe within political and business elites (Lewin 2002:390 ff). Neutrality was effectively sidelined as membership was defined as an economic question in Swedish politics, and full market integration of the EFTA countries – including the neutrals – was realised relatively smoothly in the negotiations with the European Commission (Lundgren Rydén 2000:197; Ikonomou & Gehler 2019: 519 ff).

Erik Ringmar has suggested that this combination of external and domestic elements constituted a moment of national identity crisis in Sweden which was played out in the pre-referendum debates on European membership (1998:51-52). In the contemporary Swedish debate, a European turn was called for in a number of publications that problematised the narrative of modern Sweden by conservative authors (e.g. Gerholm 1991; Ohlsson 1993). Such texts identified in the country’s social democratic era a sharp dividing line between “Sweden” and “Europe”, a point that was further driven home in Bo Stråth’s *Folkhemmet mot Europa*, published in 1992 and a key text in the Swedish debate (Axelsson 2006:46). The concern for the problems of the present led to a new public and popular interest in Swedish history, reflecting ideas about a more permanent Swedishness rooted in historical experiences stretching further back than the beginnings of the social democratic welfare state in the 1930s. Debates on European belonging and post-Cold War reorientations, of course, were far from unique to Sweden. The fall of the Berlin Wall introduced a number of “returns to Europe” in the former Communist countries. Processes of enlargement came with the activation of symbolic repertoires in all countries affected by it (Ikonomou et al 2017). Ulf Zander observes that traces of the “return of history” that characterised Eastern and Central Europe – causing enthusiasm for the history of the Habsburg empire and long-forgotten concept of *Mitteleuropa* – also occurred in Sweden (2001:405). As the road to Europe opened up after many years of Swedish “splendid isolation”, history itself became politicised, as those opposing membership evoked the country’s long tradition of independence and autonomy while those in favour pointed out that Sweden since the Viking Age and throughout history had been a part of Europe.

European belonging was central for the new centre-right coalition government that took up office in Sweden in October 1991. In Paris, Prime Minister Carl Bildt

told *Le Monde* that Sweden for far too long had been isolated from Europe, and that the “adversaries of change always end up losing” (Debove 1991). Swedish membership in the EU was a core part of the conservative-liberal modernity vision, which would have bearings on the overall rhetoric and specific areas of policy. Tellingly, the political slogans were calls for “system change” and “a new start for Sweden”, as the coalition’s election manifesto was entitled; Bildt triumphantly proclaimed that “the Swedish model was thrown on the rubbish heap of history” (*Sverige i utländsk press* 1991:2). According to historian Torbjörn Nilsson, the sparkling future-optimism expressed around 1990 was without precedent in the Moderate party’s history (2014:49). The conservative intellectual monthly *Svenskt Tidskrift*, edited by Margareta af Ugglas, who would become Minister for Foreign Affairs, insisted that “Europe’s freedom revolution has now reached Moscow. It is high time that it reaches Sweden too. (...) Sweden must utilise its European opportunities.” (1991: 403)

The victory of the centre-right coalition, along with the deteriorating state of the Swedish economy, ushered in changes in the organisational landscape of Swedish public diplomacy. The government dissolved the public Swedish Tourist Council, replacing it with the private company, *Next Stop Sweden*. Moreover, the government created a new public agency, *Image Sweden (Styrelsen för Sverigebild)* – led by former Moderate party leader Ulf Adelson, tasked with providing financial support for the promotion of Swedish tourism abroad as well as administering the pilot project Invest in Sweden to attract foreign investments. As such, concerns over the image of Sweden abroad were seen as a part of the attempts at helping Swedish economy back on feet after the crisis. Furthermore, the government initiated a debate over the future of the Swedish Institute – the public foundation charged with international cultural exchange and Sweden information. Signals were clear: the Institute would need to be open to other Swedish overseas actors, notably business interests, and take on the role of demand-driven service- and content provider to Swedish society. A thorough revision of the Institute’s role was therefore initiated, in order to reflect the changes in Sweden and its new international position, as the country moved from the active foreign policy and Third-Worldism of the Cold War era towards NATO collaboration and European membership (Bjereld, Johansson & Molin 2008:326). One important aspect of this reorientation was a turn towards the democratising and liberalising countries of Eastern Europe, and the Swedish Institute was given a key role in strengthening ties across the Baltic Sea as part of strategies for opening new markets for Swedish economic interests (Åkerlund 2016:112). Another important aspect was intensified activities in the member states of the EC. Government-commissioned reports of the Institute’s activities concluded that there was a strong need for creating alternative images to the Swedish model, not

least of promoting Sweden as a “European cultural nation” (Faxén 1993:8) This echoed statements and reforms from the field of cultural policy, where the Bildt government represented a break with the “new cultural policy” put in place in the early 1970s, focusing to a much stronger extent on Swedish national culture and heritage (Harding 2007:171). In addition to this, the economic hardships resulted in a reduction of state funds for cultural institutions: cuts in public spending which were however accompanied by a declared ambition that private actors should take on a more active role in cultural life through sponsoring – a new practice in Sweden, but much more common in other European countries.

It was in this context that the project of a large-scale French-Swedish exhibition on the 18<sup>th</sup> century took shape at *Nationalmuseum* and in the Swedish Institute. The initial ambition was an exhibition that would reveal the continuities of a Swedish national design tradition, with its roots in the nation’s historical poverty, and show the world that the Swedish model was “more than just words.” Such a project, first outlined by Swedish Institute director Anders Clason as “The Roots of IKEA”, would be achieved by linking heritage with business, more precisely by bringing IKEA into the museum (1985:10). This was how it was presented to IKEA, which had recently launched its collaboration with the Swedish Heritage Board on the Gustavian collection, in 1991 in a bid to making the company sponsor the event.<sup>3</sup> In the context of French-Swedish relations, partners-to-be Volvo and Renault were singled out as the perfect sponsors. Volvo’s long-time chairman P.G. Gyllenhammar – an industrial visionary and strong advocate of Swedish EU membership – was approached by Clason and former Minister of Finance, the Institute’s board president Kjell-Olof Feldt, who succeeded in getting the car manufacturer on board. However, as the scope of the project broadened – not least through the decision to first display the exhibition on a “general repetition” at *Nationalmuseum* in Stockholm – the exclusive sponsorship of Volvo and Renault in France was renegotiated. The Wallenberg sphere was already engaged through some of its companies which were permanent sponsors of *Nationalmuseum*, and several of its other companies now joined ranks to contribute with more funds for the exhibition.

Problems arose however shortly before the exhibition was due to leave for Paris. In December 1993, Volvo shareholders refused the proposed merger of Volvo and Renault after months of heated debate. French newspapers reported of strong anti-French sentiments in Sweden, the result of which, according to Swedish diplomats in Paris, was an image crisis for Sweden in France (Ersman 1994:16-17). As a consequence of the failed merger, Renault pulled out of the project, leaving it underfunded at a critical moment, when the French co-organisers deemed extra PR funds absolutely necessary for the project’s success. After a mobilisation on the side of the Swedish organisers, Volvo stepped in to cover the lost Renault funds,

whereas the Ministry for Foreign Affairs allocated extra funds for PR purposes. This turn was all the more urgent as IKEA, which had sponsored the Stockholm part of the exhibition, decided not to participate in Paris. All of this entailed a redefinition of the exhibition project. Instead of essentially crowning a successful merger that would symbolise Swedish industrial integration with Europe, its main task became that of a short-term goodwill campaign in a key future partner. In the words of marketing consultant Torsten Henriksson, ambitions now expanded well beyond the sphere of culture: in the campaign, “culture and business walked hand in hand” (1993:4). This was clearly reflected in the opening weeks of the exhibition. Together with the Swedish royals came a large political delegation, including three ministers, the Swedish Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, and what was characterised as “the largest industrial delegation in Swedish history” (Norée 1994).

### **The Sun and the North Star**

The campaign should be understood in the perspective of the contemporary attempts at re-branding Sweden as a European, modern and liberal state. As a promotional exercise it functioned by means of historical analogy. In the Grand Palais exhibition, French-Swedish history and heritage were aestheticised and narratively displayed as the story of how European modernity arrived in Sweden. Outside of the museum’s walls, it staged the background to an occasion and opportunity to present new narratives and images of Sweden directed at target publics in France.

*The Sun and the North Star* was arguably the first Swedish example of a blockbuster exhibition abroad. This term, which first originated in the United States in the 1970s, has come to signify large-scale exhibitions marketed to a large audience, evoking international hit movies (Goldfarb 2002:149; Zarobell 2017:66). While rooted in exhibition practices going back to the first international expositions, the border-crossing blockbuster exhibition as a genre came to the fore during the 1970s and 1980s, and it has been argued that the emergence of the phenomenon was strongly tied to its diplomatic origins (Berryman 2013). The organisation of blockbuster exhibitions was not the exclusivity of the Cold War superpowers, with early forerunners like the French *La Joconde* and *Trésors de Versailles* touring the US in the early 1960s (Chaubet & Martin 2011:126).

While *The Sun and the North Star* through its focus on displaying treasures from Swedish castles, manors and museums to French publics shared characteristic traits with such blockbuster exhibitions, it also, crucially, represented different ambitions. Essentially, the exhibition commemorated a special relation between France and Sweden. The exhibition’s chronology was structured around four key dates, from the fire of the royal castle in Stockholm in 1697 through the coronation

of King Adolf Fredrik and Queen Louise Ulrique in 1751, and Gustav III's coup d'état in 1772, before it concluded with the assassination of Gustav in Stockholm's Royal Opera House in 1792. It thus moved from the late Carolean era through the Age of Liberty and to the Gustavian period. The theme of the exhibition, as expressed in its title, was how the *rayonnement* of French culture had spread to Sweden – how French aesthetic refinement and scientific enlightenment imported and adopted by Swedes had transformed the Nordic country from waning military power and cultural backwater to a modern European country. The main message was one of a particular French-Swedish friendship, *une amitié millenaire*, to cite the title of an ambitious anthology published for the occasion (Battail & Battail 1993). One key sales point used by the exhibition's organisers was how French cultural heritage eradicated by the French Revolution had survived and been preserved in Swedish collections – *The Sun and the North Star* thus provided an occasion to see magnificent pieces that no longer existed in France. In this way, Sweden's European identity was also restored: not only had Sweden been well within the French cultural orbit in the past, but it could bring back a lost part of European cultural heritage, staging indeed a particular Swedish variety of the narrative of the return to Europe.

The Grand Palais exhibition thus introduced a century of Swedish history that was portrayed as something of a national renaissance, where Sweden due to its openness towards continental Europe experienced a remarkable development. Turning away from military great power ambitions to the cultivation of industry, science and the arts, eighteenth century Sweden could instead prosper in peace within its borders. These borders, however, were little problematized, despite their lack of correspondence to those of modern Sweden. There were few traces of the everyday life of commoners in the exhibition; nor was the relationship between various parts of the realm including overseas colonies like Saint Barthélemy and extra-Baltic possessions in Germany evoked. Whereas *The Sun and the North Star* repeatedly underlined that its theme was the Age of Enlightenment – indeed, its working title had been “Sweden in France, France in Sweden during the Age of Enlightenment” – it dealt little with the enlightenment as a political-intellectual movement paving the way for modernity, democracy and rationality. The idea of revolution was barely evoked, save for Jean-François Battail's remark in the catalogue, evoking more recent political images, that “[t]he Swedish way par excellence is reformist, not revolutionary” (*Le Soleil et l'Étoile du Nord* 1994:20). The exhibition did however make a point out of how Swedish noblemen, artists, and scientists travelling to France and their French counterparts travelling north were central actors within this history of cultural transfer. The title itself did little to counterbalance this – several catalogue essays repeated that King Charles XI had modelled his adoption of the North Star as a national emblem on Louis

XIV's identification with the sun. Moreover, the usage of the sun as the central metaphor not only for the Grand Siècle of Louis XIV, but also for the century in focus, suggested that it was not only the royal figure, but indeed France itself that became the sun. In this context, the concept of model was very present: *The Sun and the North Star*, to put it short, was the history of how Sweden was reshaped after French models (*Le Soleil et l'Étoile du Nord* 1994:29).

As part of the larger Swedish charm offensive, the shared history commemorated in *The Sun and the North Star* might belong to a long-gone past, but was also an open-ended heritage, a source of inspiration in a contemporary, eclectic setting. The Grand Palais exhibition's last section represented its *clou* in this respect, although it was not part of *The Sun and the North Star* per se, and not included in the catalogue. In this final display, visitors could meet the period's architecture, interiors and furniture – authentic or reconstructed – as they appeared today, in castles and manor houses around Sweden, in a slideshow of photographs taken in natural light by the photographer Ingalill Snitt (Hedqvist 1994; Mårdh 2017:271). Snitt had collaborated with *Nationalmuseum's* Lars Sjöberg on various projects; some of her photos displayed at the Grand Palais would later appear in *The Swedish Room*, which Snitt together with Lars and Ursula Sjöberg published on Swedish historical interiors (1994). The photo exhibition was titled “From castles to manor houses” and symbolised the transformation of French style as copied in the royal environments to Gustavian style around Sweden.<sup>4</sup> In this way the inclusion of Snitt's photo exhibition provided a contrasting, contemporary look at the historical heritage on display in the exhibition, a connection with the ongoing fad for Gustavianism as commercial lifestyle in Sweden. Moreover, the contemporary photo exhibition represented a bridge towards the Swedish promotion campaign that took place outside of the Grand Palais.

### **The Rise of the New Gustavians**

The Swedish campaign that took place in Paris following the opening of the exhibition represented an opportunity to engage with pressing concerns related to Swedish politics and economy as the country prepared to join the EU. As Adam Hjorthén argues, the “contemporary dimension is an intrinsic part of commemorative activities,” and it therefore matters “how the actors retained the significance of the commemorations by making history meaningful in the present” (2015:30-31). In Paris during spring 1994, Swedish actors used the commemorations to produce new Swedish narratives and images and to inscribe the French-Swedish relation with new meaning in the present. While the cultural projects produced by Nationalmuseum and the Swedish Institute represented the main manifestations of the campaign in France, the overall aims were just as

much of an economic and political nature, and this was expressed openly by the Swedish organisers (*Nyhetsbrev* 1993:2-3). As Zarobell has observed, in the 1990s, the blockbuster exhibition came into its own as a universal phenomenon, linked with economic concerns in an era of globalisation and neoliberalism, uniting the agendas of sponsors with political ambitions, cultural tourism and the promotion of commodities (2016:72-80). These aspects were all central in the marketing strategies of the Swedish campaign; cultural platforms were used to the benefit of Swedish business interests as well as political actors.

The links between the past and the present Europeanness of Sweden were emphasised not only through the rhetoric of millennial friendship, but also performatively, in commemorations through re-enactment: the present was seen in light of the past, with interlinkages and continuities strongly emphasised. In her study of 20<sup>th</sup> century mediations of Gustavian style, Hedvig Mårdh has analysed how performances of the eighteenth century became popular in Sweden in the early 1990s, both in public and private settings, through the activities of historical societies (2017:296-298). One example of this in Paris was a ceremony organised at the *Invalides*, where King Carl XVI Gustaf and the baron of Sparre presented Mitterrand with a replica of the last banner of the *Royal Suédois*, a Swedish regiment of the French royal army disbanded under the Revolution. For the occasion, the *Smålands karoliner* – an amateur association that re-enacted historical battles – paraded in Paris in their Carolean uniforms. While providing decorative pomp and circumstance, they were not the only soldiers present: the ceremony was attended by companies of French and Swedish infantry flown in from peace-keeping missions in Bosnia, underlining that today as well as yesterday Swedes and Frenchmen were brothers in arms.

Other events went further, by actually providing the participating Swedish and French elites with occasions to perform time travel. Mårdh emphasises that the point of the time travelling ventures was to let participants experience, together, the atmosphere of another time, by immersing them in the trappings of a historical period – its objects, smells, and music – rather than to role-play (2017:304-307). During *The Sun and the North Star in Paris*, one particular event epitomised this type of elite social interaction, providing an opportunity to taste the past: the so-called *buffets bucoliques* – dinner parties at the Swedish Club hosted by Swedish ministers for select Swedes and Frenchmen. These *bucolic buffets* were organised in recreated 18th century surroundings, with time-typical music and “authentic” menus. Brought together in such environments, political, business and cultural elites could rekindle the friendship between the countries after the Volvo-Renault debacle.

In this way, the cultural campaign orchestrated by the Swedish Institute and its partners established a platform for numerous forms of French-Swedish

cooperation. It is worth emphasising that the return of history in this sense should not be considered in terms of nostalgia. Rather it was a specific use of history that was considered modern and European. This point was made very clear in the two special magazines made for French publics: the Swedish Export Association's *Suède magazine*, and *Cap sur la Suède*, produced by the PR agency Wildell France and ostensibly created by non-state actors. In truth, both were financed by advertisements for overlapping Swedish export companies, prepared through collaborations with the Swedish Institute and MFA, and largely written by the same people – most of them French journalists with experience from Sweden. *Cap sur la Suède* introduced Sweden through a team of prominent contemporary Swedes, *the New Gustavians*. In the magazine's editorial, marketing specialist Richard Beer stated:

Gustav remains a reference. Contemporary Sweden has barely escaped from its most serious crisis since the thirties. We would well believe that she has done so thanks to the spirit of the "New Gustavians" described in these pages. Some of them are Francophiles, most of them staunch Europhiles. But their veritable common trait is that they manifest a sort of intemporal excellence. Crisis or no crisis, it's all about not losing the north! (1994:5)

The list of New Gustavians included the royal family, the journalist turned popular historian Herman Lindqvist, the minister of finance Anne Wibble, and a number of businessmen and industry leaders such as Ingvar Kamprad, P. G. Gyllenhammar, Percy Barnevik and the baron Jacob Palmstierna. But along with this group was also another category of New Gustavians, namely names from the contemporary cultural scene. This combination of young stars of the cultural scene with ministers and businessmen, all of them expressing strong affinities with continental Europe, was replicated by *Suède magazine*.

Most of *Cap*'s 60,000 copies were distributed with the newspaper *Le Figaro* to its subscribers. Wildell's idea was to create a quality journalistic product inspired by the best in-flight magazines of airlines, like SAS' *Scanorama* and Air Inter's *Parcours*, but also reminiscent of the standard fare of French educated readers like *L'Express* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*.<sup>5</sup> While *Cap* drew inspiration from such magazines, *Suède magazine* had a more official profile and was explicitly linked to the exhibition. Its 50,000 copies were to be handed out to French decision makers and opinion builders at the exhibition and distributed by the Export Council to select recipients proposed by the sponsoring companies.<sup>6</sup> The publication started with a foreword signed by the King of Sweden, who highlighted the symbolic meaning of the moment:

It is in their common values that European countries now find the wellspring of a durable union. Sweden is today at the threshold of the European Union. Swedish industry has increased its productivity and pursue the development of its international integration. One starts to see solutions to the economic problems of Sweden during the last years. (*Suède magazine* 1994:1)

Despite the official profile of *Suède magazine's* layout, its contents and messages mirrored those of *Cap* very closely. Overall, the two publications painted the picture of a re-born Sweden, whose elites were preparing for the opportunities of membership in the European Union, even though, as Lindqvist stated in an interview, the country had “too long marinated in American culture” and many still struggled with the idea of “becoming European” (Niëto 1994a:6). This was presented as a problem in *Suède magazine*, where Peter Wallenberg declared that he was truly put-off by the principle of a referendum “in the name of democracy,” and Magnus Lemmel criticised the Swedes for caring about insignificant details instead of economic growth (Niëto 1994b:11-12). By and large, however, the Swedish membership was treated as a *fait accompli*, and the magazines made sure to inform about the opportunities soon available for French companies in investing in Sweden. Recent developments such as the government-initiated privatisations and deregulations of the economy, along with the fall of the Swedish krona, made Sweden a “trade fair” (Nietö 1994b:12). Cultural competence was highlighted as an important prerequisite for success: in this respect the Volvo-Renault merger served as both a model to be followed – that of cross-border integration – and as a warning example, showing what might happen if one did not take cultural differences seriously.

### The Reception of the Campaign

From the inaugural week of the activities in Paris, the Swedish organisers interpreted the reception of the exhibition and accompanying activities in light of the Volvo-Renault failure, as a massive manifestation to win back lost goodwill in France. The official project newsletter stated that Swedish speculations that the campaign would fall short were proven wrong:

The timing turned out to be perfect. The worst emotional surges in mass media had calmed down in France, and the impressive line-up of the Swedish business elite – possibly influenced by the atmosphere in France – vigorously disclaimed French testimonies that we don't like them (*Nyhetsbrev* 1994:1).

Many French reviewers of the exhibition portrayed it as a page now turned from industrial misunderstandings and Swedish anti-Europeanism to newfound European happiness. “Today Sweden enjoys perfect love with France. At least she displays it...” wrote *Le Figaro*, noting that this display came through an exhibition of “abundance, diversity, power and enormous seduction” (Tasset 1994). Similarly, *Libération* likened the exhibition rooms with the halls of Ali Baba, pointing at the treasures that had been kept in Sweden but disappeared in France due to wars and revolutions. The leftist daily noted that the Volvo-Renault debacle had led to a bad image for Sweden in France, but that with the membership negotiations completed, the Sun could now achieve its new rendez-vous with the North Star (*Nyhetsbrev* 1994:2-3). Pushing the metaphor, *Le Journal du Dimanche* described with another reference to the broken marriage between the two car giants that France and Sweden had formed a new engagement (*Nyhetsbrev* 1994:2).

Although *The Sun* and the *North Star*’s specialised character restricted reviews to the cultural pages of the newspapers, the accompanying Swedish efforts resulted in more press attention. Most importantly, influential lifestyle magazine *Elle Décoration* published a special issue that introduced the Neo-Gustavian as a contemporary lifestyle (1994). The Swedish Cultural Centre’s Birgitta Rabot, press secretary for the campaign in France, compared the Swedish efforts in Paris with the Olympic Games at Lillehammer. According to her, the positive attention given to Sweden could be favourably compared with that granted to Norway earlier that winter, telling Swedish press fantastically that “French observers say no other country has ever received so much attention in French newspapers as Sweden does now” (Sundblad 1994). This was even more impressive taken into consideration that the Olympics had costed some five billion Norwegian *kroner* while the Swedish taxpayers’ bill amounted to a paltry seventeen million Swedish *kronor*, Rabot hinted.

The Swedish royals played a central part in the promotional campaign. In an exclusive interview with *Le Figaro*’s Stéphane Bern, a young royalist journalist, the King and Queen shared their reflections about “the role of a royal couple in the Europe of tomorrow” (Bern 1994). Carl XVI Gustaf declared that he was happy with the completion of the Swedish membership negotiations, citing his devise “For Sweden – with the times” and explaining that it was important for him to follow trends in society and prepare the future without losing touch with national roots and traditions:

In modern Swedish society a monarch is a symbol, an ambassador, a flagbearer, or, to use a contemporary term, a VIP for his country. I believe that, in the Europe that will come, the monarchy’s role in Sweden

will be to guarantee national identity and incarnate our traditions and culture. (Bern 1994)

While public criticism against the contents of the Swedish exhibition and accompanying activities was as good as absent, the role of the Swedish royals were not unisonally appreciated. *Expressen's* Paris correspondent Ulf Nilson, commenting on the opening of *The Sun and the North Star*, wrote that he felt sympathy for the King, who so obviously did not want to be there (1994). Suggesting that more than an occasion for solidarity between peoples the French-Swedish celebration was one of fraternisation between elites, Nilson recounted how "Mme la baronne af Ugglas" had declared at a Quai d'Orsay lunch that "France and Sweden should be reunited", observing that all Swedish elite representatives in France seemed annoyed and ashamed for the failure of the Volvo-Renault merger. Nilson concluded that the entire spectacle was about one thing: *image*. The criticism against the role of the royals was picked up on and some went further, such as *Résumé*, a Swedish weekly magazine for advertisers. Its editor Peppe Engberg wrote a propos Carl XVI Gustaf's appearances in France that "[T]he man is a disaster. If he had applied for the job he would never have got it," and proposed that an impersonator would have done a better job; "[R]ather a clown on the stage than nothing" (Engberg 1994). The press criticism against the King's effort at representing Sweden in France was countered by the Royal Court's press officer, listing up the packed programme of the royals in Paris: "[Y]ou if anyone should know what this represents in advertisement money for Sweden. Millions" (Tarras-Wahlberg 1994). The Court's critics did not go unchallenged. Engberg said the reactions he had provoked were so strong that he felt he had become "a modern Jacob Johan Anckarström", referring to Gustav III's assassin, executed in front of an agitated crowd. Among those taking up the gauntlet in defence of the King were Gustaf von Platen and Peter Wallenberg, two active participants in the Swedish campaign in Paris. Wallenberg cited the extraordinary importance of the royals at bilateral meetings, praising their "highly professional way to represent Sweden" (Wallenberg 1994). Common to the defenses of the royal role in the manifestations was their focus on the urgency of improving both bilateral relations with France, and creating goodwill for Sweden. In the short-term, crisis management perspective adopted by the Swedish campaign after the Volvo-Renault affair, a principled critique of the Swedish monarchs' representativeness for Sweden, as Nilson and Engberg actually raised in their diatribes, hardly seemed relevant. And in such a perspective, the campaign was deemed a great success. The MFA's analysis of French media coverage of Sweden observed that previous years' preoccupation with social malaise and economic crisis had given way to more positive depictions, welcoming Sweden as a new European member state (*Sverige*

*i utländsk press* 1994:24). Overall, the joint exhibition and campaign became a symbol of what was possible to achieve by coordinating business initiatives with cultural outreach. One analysis spoke of “an unused potential in Swedish culture” that could be used to strengthen Swedish presence in France in the future (Tegelberg 1994:26). This echoed the Swedish Institute’s own evaluation, where director Per Sörbom stated that the success in France was an example of “the role culture can play when collaboration between two countries experiences hiccups on other levels” (Sörbom 1994:3). For an institution that only a few months earlier had feared for its survival in the new economic and political climate in Sweden, this was certainly good news.

### **The Tensions and Ambiguities of Gustavian Style as National Narrative**

*The Sun and the North Star* was Sweden’s first blockbuster exhibition, repeatedly claimed to represent the country’s largest cultural manifestation abroad in history. Sweden had taken part in previous grand exhibitions organised in Paris, such as *Lumières du Nord*, a display of Scandinavian fin-de-siècle paintings in 1987, and *Feu et glace* about Vikings in 1992. Whereas these projects were Scandinavian exhibitions, highlighting the regional character of art and history, *The Sun and the North Star* was a *Swedish* exhibition. It emphasised the special character of the Swedish–French relation and the centrality of French impulses in the national history of Sweden – a shared history where the Nordic neighbours had no place, despite the fact that Finland during the entire period had been an integral part of the Swedish realm. Although the adjectives “Nordic” and “Scandinavian” occurred in the exhibition texts, they were used as synonyms to “Swedish”, and never to problematise either the role of French culture in these neighbouring countries or the shifting borders in Northern Europe during the period. This reflected national administrative evolutions concerning material cultural heritage: in the mid-1980s, Swedish heritage was legally defined by the Riksdag as objects made within the borders of present-day Sweden or made abroad by someone from Sweden (Bydler 2015:97-98). At the same time such an understanding of eighteenth century cultural history was not new. Mårdh suggests that the methodological nationalism of Swedish academia created an understanding of the Gustavian as national rather than regional that made it a suitable material legacy for reinforcing national identity at various moments in the twentieth century (2017:37-38).

The historian John Gillis has defined the core meaning of identity as “a sense of sameness over time and space” (1996:3). Identity is, he argues, “sustained by the act of remembering; and what is remembered is defined by the assumed identity.” Memories are thus constantly being revised to suit changing identities, and always

“embedded in complex class, gender and power relations that determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end.” Quite precisely how the Gustavian style has been remembered (or forgotten) as Swedish national identity has however varied throughout the twentieth century. According to the historian Viktor Edman, there has since the early twentieth century been a latent ambivalence in considerations over the national or foreign features of Gustavian style (2008:207-208). On the one hand the international influences showed that Sweden was connected to the leading cultural nations of the time. On the other hand, Swedish culture ran the risk of being seen as too dependent on copying foreign models. This ambivalence between foreign and national was clearly present in *The Sun and the North Star*. But there was also another tension in the project, relating to the narrative of Swedish modernity that the exhibition and surrounding events displayed and staged in Paris.

One regret about the exhibition in Paris from one of the key figures involved was that it underplayed the *simplicity* of Gustavian manor milieus to the benefit of royal splendours (Lundholm 1995:31). This provides a key to understanding something essential about the nature of the transformations in Sweden during the 1990s. Through the twentieth century, simplicity and absence of exaggerated decoration had been particularly singled out as typically Swedish features of the Gustavian style and were used to demarcate it as a national Swedish style and not simply a copy of foreign styles (Edman 2007:207). Gustavian interior decoration was through the century seen as an expression of a domestic, Swedish style that harmonised well with later, modernistic interiors. This “openness” of the eighteenth century towards the future had figured prominently in some of the early visions for *The Sun and the North Star*, but it was a conception left almost completely aside in the realised exhibition.

The Gustavianism displayed at the Grand Palais instead focused on the French royal roots of the style, in contrast to IKEA which in its marketing of the eighteenth century collection presented it as a starting point for Swedish modern design and architecture. This was a theme that had been present in mediations of the Gustavian style since the 1930s, in dialogue with Swedish modernism. Among the modernist pioneers, several had gone to pains in establishing this link between national heritage and modernism; the identification of commonalities between functionalism and the material architectural heritage available in poor, rural environments had been both a pedagogical and propagandist tool in the “patchwork history” of Swedish modernity in the 1930s (Mattson & Wallenstein 2010:34; Mårdh 2017:237). This was a history that the initial idea for the exhibition had wanted to represent, showing through IKEA’s participation the unbroken line from the eighteenth century through the functionalist era and all the way to the present day. The non-participation of the furniture company weakened this aspect

of the exhibition considerably. This was a point that some Swedish design critics observed. The journalist Susanne Pagold noted that *The Sun and the North Star* aesthetised all sorts of objects, even war materials, and noted that there was too little “Swedified poor man’s variants” for the French public to understand how the peasant versions of the Gustavian style pointed forwards towards modernism (1994). Conversely, this was at the core of IKEA’s promotion of the eighteenth century collection both in Sweden and in France, the only other country where the Gustavian collection sold well (Mårdh 2017:266). IKEA’s French ads underlined at the same time the French roots and the profound Swedishness of the style, highlighting the similarities of the Gustavian style with the company’s own brand identity: “The functional is beautiful. This has been a modern idea for 200 years” (*Cap sur la Suède* 1994:10-11). In this sense, the ads claimed, IKEA had “once and for all solved the struggle between the ancient and the moderns” (*Cap sur la Suède* 1994:30-31). Gustavian furniture was particularly well disposed for contemporary decorative marriages between old and new, the ads told.

Instead of promoting the eighteenth century’s unbroken continuities to the present, the Swedish campaign inside and outside the Grand Palais centred on a different national narrative. Opening up not forwards, but backwards in history by including the late Carolean era, the Gustavian style became first and foremost a result of Frenchification – a copy of the French model – an influence that abruptly ended with the assassination of Gustav III. The period between the eighteenth century and the present, rather than representing a Swedification of European impulses, was in this perspective a broken line. Despite the many links between the two, the Swedish campaign’s historical continuity was not the same as IKEA’s. In this sense, it was not reformist, but counter-revolutionary: the Gustavian era and style was not a beginning, but an end point. The core message of the New Gustavians thus was how, after two centuries of increasing isolation, Sweden was once more ready to come back to Europe.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have shown how the transition period of the early 1990s introduced shifts both in the foreign images of Sweden and in how the image was imagined by Swedish political and public diplomacy actors. Following the elections in 1991, a shift occurred in Swedish public diplomacy, challenging the central position of the public Swedish Institute. As images of the fallen Swedish model spread around the world’s press, there was a politically motivated search for alternative images of Sweden to focus on in foreign outreach – not least seen in relation with oncoming European membership. Tellingly, in the Swedish campaign in Paris, all references to Sweden as a social model were gone. Instead, evaluations of the

Swedish Institute's activities recommended an increased focus on "Sweden as a cultural nation" in Europe, and in this context the Gustavian ambivalence proved a perfect fit – in the specific interpretation outlined above. In *The Sun and the North Star* and the accompanying promotion campaign for Sweden, the Swedish Institute served as a producer of frameworks in which other actors could work to pursue political and economical goals. This framework was made up both by the exhibition's national narrative of European Sweden, and by the New Gustavians' campaign which produced a vision for the future by historical analogy with Gustav III and his courtiers as mascots for the promotion of a new Sweden in Europe.

Nikolas Glover's research on Swedish public diplomacy has shown that it went through a gradual evolution from an *enlightenment* (*upplysning*) paradigm to an *information* paradigm during the postwar decades. The study of the early 1990s suggests the emergence of another paradigm, that of *promotion* (*främjande*), characterised by new forms of state-private collaboration and institutional reorganisations, where the role of culture in foreign relations increasingly was to serve national interests defined in economic terms. In a globalizing world, Sweden promotion aimed at strengthening the image of Sweden abroad as part of an economic agenda, seeking to attract foreign investments and tourists and deploy Swedishness as a commercial tool internationally. Looking back on this development some years later, ambassador Karl-Erik Norrman, nicknamed "the father of Sweden promotion", stated:

To apply a broader cultural historical perspective on Sweden weeks, Sweden days or other Sweden events is no "nostalgic nonsense". It is a safe, long-term investment to the benefit of growth and jobs in Sweden (Norrman 1997:29).<sup>7</sup>

By then, information had become promotion; the Council for Sweden Information abroad had become the Council for Sweden Promotion abroad. This qualifies James Pamment's argument that nation branding in the Nordic context was the result of a rearticulation of mid-90s' British debates and techniques (Pamment 2016:95). At least in Sweden, the key term of the image of Sweden had already for decades been a well-established category, whose instrumentalization during the period of national crisis was evident not least in the existence of the short-lived public agency Image Sweden. The "economization of foreign cultural policy" in Sweden should perhaps rather be seen as a parallel development to that of "Cool Britannia", as well as other emerging "competition states" like Germany (Varga 2013:448ff).

The analysis of the turn in Swedish national promotion from the social democratic Swedish model to the Gustavian appropriations of French models

helps to increase our understanding of the national identity politics pursued during the years of the 1990s crisis. It took concrete form in the narrations of history and heritage, where the European component in Sweden's modern trajectory contributed to underscore its Europeanness, and lent itself easily to political interpretations, in the bourgeois government's attempt at "normalizing" Sweden by readjusting to "European" standards. As Ringmar argues, politicians were heavily involved with shaping public opinion in favour of membership ahead of the European referendum (1998:58). Integrating themes highly present in contemporary Swedish cultural and political debates, *The Sun and the North Star* also contributed to create a strengthened focus on these themes, illustrating the complex relationship between public culture and public diplomacy. In other words, while representing a major example of public foreign *outreach*, in the form of combined state and corporate efforts to promote Sweden as European in France, the exhibition project can also be studied as an example of *inreach*, of introducing domestic publics as well as politicians and business actors to re-interpreted material heritage and narratives representing Sweden's European past in line with the Bildt government's ambition to "Europeanise Sweden".

Whereas previous research has suggested that liberal and conservative membership advocates spoke about "Europe and the future" rather than about "Sweden and the past", to the extent that the Moderate Party's future visions represented a "conservative party without fatherland", the promotion of European Sweden as the New Gustavians represented a synthesis of the two (Axelsson 2006:207; Westberg 2003:234ff). The mobilisation of a particular past meant evoking a different possible future. In this sense, the Swedish return to the eighteenth century in the early 1990s did not represent a regressive, but perhaps rather a progressive nationalism, not anti-European but pro-European. While nationalist and racist groups sought to appropriate the heritage of the "warrior kings" in their mobilisation against immigration, official Sweden instead instrumentalised a different part of the past. This is a point that has gone amiss in previous Swedish scholarship on the uses of history in the European debates. In a time when debates over a common European identity flourished on the continent, normal countries in Europe were those possessing a heritage which linked them to a common European culture and civilisation. It was certainly no coincidence that Carl Bildt's political autobiography, published during the electoral campaign of 1991, was entitled *Hallänning, svensk, europé* (*Hallander, Swede, European*) – a paraphrase of Gustav III's favourite Schröderheim's dictum "Smälänning, svensk, europé" (*Smäländer, Swede, European*) (Bildt 1991).

## Author presentation

**Andreas Mørkved Hellenes** is a contemporary historian and works as a postdoctoral researcher at Aarhus University, Denmark, on a research project funded by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (Project 8018-00023B). His main research interests include Scandinavian internationalism, transport history, and Nordic-European relations.

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<sup>1</sup> This was not the first time Swedish-French historical relations were highlighted to serve contemporary interests. See e.g. Mårdh 2017: 177-178; Hellenes 2019: 215-222.

<sup>2</sup> This is the case in e.g. Glover 2012, along with a wide range of studies of images of “Swedish progressiveness” in foreign policy and nation branding. For an exception see Hjorthén 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Letter from Clason to Moberg, March 19, 1991; letter from Grate to Ekmark, March 21, 1991; letter from Clason to Stichting IKEA Foundation, August 19, 1991. All in NM/AVD, F1A:411.

<sup>4</sup> “Texte de l’audiovisuel: (De châteaux en manoirs) (La Suède au XVIIIe siècle)”, Patrick Ladoucette Réalisations audiovisuelles. NM/AVD, F1A:456.

<sup>5</sup> RB, “Projet de magazine grand public pour publication durant l’exposition Le Soleil et l’Étoile du Nord. Grand Palais, Paris, mars-mai 1994”, project proposal, July 1, 1993, 2. Attached to fax from Beer to Svenstedt, July 1, 1993. SI2, F2:44.

<sup>6</sup> KTH, “Minnesanteckningar från möte ang Solen & Nordstjärnan på Centre Culturel Suédois i Paris den 6 januari 1994”, memorandum, January 10, 1994, 3. SI2, F2:44.

<sup>7</sup> Similar attempts at using historical connections to strengthen contemporary relations were also used by the Swedish MFA and the Swedish Institute in other European countries, e.g. with the large-scale exhibition *Wahlverwandschaft* in Germany, 1997.

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