

The Swedes and their history

Hans Olofsson*, Johan Samuelsson, Martin Stolare and Joakim Wendell
Karlstad University

Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse adolescents' views of Swedish history. A small number of adults were also included in the study. The analysis shows that, regardless of the age of the informants, Sweden is portrayed as an exception from the world through its legacy of a long peace (in spite of a war-torn distant history) and through its enjoyment of progress, democracy and prosperity. We interpret this as a result of a history culture in which schools as well as other institutions produce a common, conflict-free history, which may be challenged in an emerging neonationalist era.

Keywords: Swedish history; collective memory; history culture; history education; history syllabuses; nationalism

Introduction

Since Gustav Vasa was king in the sixteenth century, Sweden changed enormously, both religion, rights and living conditions during those centuries. Sweden has developed from a poor country to a freer, more equal rich country with more rights for both rich and poor, for instance.
(13-year-old informant)

In these sentences, a 13-year-old informant in our study of adolescents' historical conceptions of Sweden summarizes the history of the country. This study draws inspiration from international research, such as studies from Québec (Létourneau, 2006; Conrad *et al.*, 2013), Russia (Wertsch, 2002), Catalonia (Sant *et al.*, 2015) and Uganda (Holmberg, 2016), on the manner in which young people imagine the histories of their own countries or regions and the way in which this history forms part of a collective memory. The aim of this article is to analyse adolescents' views of Swedish history and to highlight the role played by schools in the construction of their narratives. We also discuss the results in the broader context of history culture, emphasizing historiographic traditions, views on cultural heritage and folk perspectives on the past (cf. Karlsson, 2011; Berger and Conrad, 2015).

This ambition has meant that we have also broadened our scope somewhat by contrasting adolescents' narratives with those of a smaller selection of middle-aged informants and pensioners. Thereby we can consider continuity and change as regards the transmission and use of Swedish history in relation to collective memory and history culture. While the former concept enables us to examine the present memory practices of the informants, the latter opens up the possibility of discussing inertia in a history-cultural context.

* Corresponding author – Email: hans.olofsson@kau.se

Put in the context of relevant research, it is through its intergenerational approach that this article can hopefully be of empirical and theoretical importance, offering a way to discuss the use of history and aspects of continuity and change. This methodological attempt is of particular interest since there have in the past decade been signs of a shift towards the revival of a more nationalistic view of the past in Sweden – as in many other countries (Berger and Conrad, 2015: 351–3).

Theoretical premises: History culture and collective memory

Our theoretical premises are rooted in memory studies and history didactics, where the two concepts of history culture and collective memory have long been used in research. *History culture* can be defined simply as ‘the way in which the past [...] is treated in a society’ (Pandel, 2014: 86). According to a more elaborate definition, history culture ‘provides concrete answers to the question of what a nation or any other history community finds worth preserving, debating, celebrating, mourning, teaching and learning from the past – but also what is considered worth forgetting, denying and trivialising’ (Karlsson, 2011: 42). As a result, history culture is interpreted, negotiated and changed depending on the context.

Rüsen (2013: 244–51) emphasizes the role played by narratives in history culture. Narratives allow individuals to participate in different communities: history becomes a way of distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’. National narratives are frequently structured around a number of events and people that constitute parts of the national history culture.

A related concept is *collective memory*. According to Wertsch (2002: 40–6), collective memory is characterized by a committed perspective that reflects a group’s social framework and links the past with the present in order to make the past useable. Wertsch furthermore underlines the common features of collective memories. They are produced and reproduced by individuals who cooperate to uphold a picture of a shared past. School history is, according to this definition, one of several arenas wherein collective memory could be formed, depending on the public acceptance of the state’s purposes as expressed in syllabuses: if these are not accepted then school history may be resisted or, to put it in other terms, not ‘appropriated’ (Wertsch, 2002: 119–20). Collective memory and history culture are thus overlapping concepts. History culture comprises all of the history used in a society (including school history) while collective memory concerns the factual use of history by individuals together with other individuals (possibly including school history).

The two concepts accordingly allow us to analyse both tensions and correspondences between Swedish history culture at large (including school history) and our informants’ narratives of Swedish history. The concept of collective memory has also been central to our analysis since it facilitates an understanding of how an individual’s fragmentary account of the past may be based on and part of a ‘distributed version’ of a common narrative (Wertsch, 2002: 23–9; cf. Létourneau, 2006: 70–1). An example of this can be seen in so-called ‘narrative abbreviations’ (i.e. allusions to past events, phenomena or agents by one single word or a phrase like ‘Waterloo’, ‘I have a dream’ or ‘Queen Elizabeth’) which hence are regarded as puzzle pieces in a potential common narrative of the past (cf. Rüsen, 1994: 10–11; Olofsson, 2014). These ‘narrative abbreviations’ can thus be considered as ‘cultural tools’ that are activated when needed and, when taken together, perceived as expressions of the collective memory of the informants (Wertsch, 2002: 55–7). Consequently, a very short text, even a single word or phrase, according to this theoretical assumption, draws on a shared ‘stock of stories’ (Wertsch, 2002: 57).

Swedish history culture: A short overview

In nineteenth-century Swedish history culture, as in many other European countries during that century of nationalism, a concern with the origins and development of the nation dominated (Berger and Conrad, 2015: 140–4). Accordingly, King Gustav Vasa (1523–60) was often ascribed the role of founding father of the nation. On monuments and in paintings, the king was depicted as a liberation hero who gave Sweden its independence, and Vasa has often been invoked by regents and leading politicians. One of the reasons that the Swedish National Day is celebrated on 6 June is to commemorate his accession to the throne (Bohman, 1997; Samuelsson and Wendell, 2016). Swedish history culture was originally characterized by historical escapism, but during the early part of the twentieth century there was an increased focus on modernization and on future perspectives (Stråth, 2001: 167–9).

This shift is captured in a 1933 quote from Per Albin Hansson, the social democratic prime minister (1932–46) often described as the architect of the Swedish welfare state: ‘In school, Engelbrekt [a fabled fifteenth-century rebel leader] and Gustav Vasa became our paragons; they were mighty freedom fighters we looked up to and whom we wanted to follow’ (quoted in Berggren, 2001: 81). Later, Hansson’s practice of invoking the image of Sweden’s past as transmitted in the history culture also became characteristic of the social democratic movement as a whole (Linderborg, 2001: 285).

Simultaneously, the growing field of academic historical research also regarded state power as a given starting point, and for a considerable time political perspectives completely dominated the field. Eventually, broader social, economic and cultural approaches emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. Despite the fact that there have been several comprehensive public debates about Swedish history, these have not been as conflicted as similar debates in other countries (Björk, 2012: 73–4; Zander, 2001).

As regards school history, there have during the last decades been a number of debates analogous to what is internationally known as the ‘history wars’. For instance, when the latest curriculum, Lgr 11, was introduced, history was one of the few subjects discussed publicly, bringing themes such as identity and origin to the surface (Samuelsson, 2016). The Swedish debate on history in school resembles the ones in the USA, Australia, Canada and Greece (Evans, 2004; Nakou and Apostolidou, 2010; Barton, 2012; Parkes, 2007; Éthier and Lefrançois, 2012). Thus, Sweden is not in any sense untouched by the ideas of ‘new nationalism’ and ‘memory booms’ (Berger and Conrad, 2015) that are currently sweeping the world, finding expression in ‘Brexit’ and in the latest election campaigns in Germany, France and the USA.

History in Swedish schools

In terms of the national curricula, until the 1960s the teaching of history in Sweden was to a significant extent a part of a public history culture that had its roots in the nineteenth century. This was particularly the case when teaching younger children. Patriotic perspectives were certainly downplayed after the First World War, and, on the whole, internationalization became a more important theme in Swedish history teaching after the Second World War (Englund, 1986; Åström Elmersjö, 2013; Nygren, 2011). During the 1960s this development culminated in an even sharper focus in Swedish society on modernity and contemporary issues, and civics came to dominate history as a subject in Swedish schools (Zander, 2001; Linderborg, 2001). From the 1970s history was incorporated into an interdisciplinary subject group called social studies. This remained the case until the introduction of the latest curriculum (2011), when history was reinstated as an independent subject throughout the entire school system: from

grade four (when pupils are aged 10) to upper secondary school (Samuelsson, 2016; Stolare, 2014). The new history syllabus in Lgr 11 aimed at addressing issues about identity and history in a multicultural context (cf. National Agency for Education, 2011: 163). In that sense, the syllabus can be understood as part of an international trend challenging the hegemonic position of methodological nationalism, and aiming towards a transnational history (Berger and Conrad, 2015: 352). The concept of historical consciousness became the didactic point of departure for managing this in the syllabus.

To strengthen the pupil's historical consciousness is the end to which all the other aspects of the syllabus are the means. These aspects are formulated as four abilities. Throughout comprehensive schooling the pupil should: (1) establish a historical frame of reference, learn how to use (2) historical methods and (3) concepts, and (4) be familiar with the fact that history is always used and displayed in different ways and for different purposes. Hence, disciplinary perspectives are important aspects of the syllabus. Use of history as an aspect was introduced in Lgr 11, and with it came the idea of history culture, a concept that teachers and pupils deal with in history class (if not explicitly then at least implicitly) (Stolare, 2017). The four abilities are closely connected to the historical content prescribed in the syllabus (events, processes, agents and perspectives). In primary school this content has a strong connection to a national and Nordic historical narrative. Later, in lower secondary school, this narrative is complemented by a stronger European (and to some extent even international and global) focus. Here the pupils read about antiquity, the French and industrial revolutions, imperialism and the world wars of the twentieth century. Dimensions of a 'collective memory approach' (Seixas, 2000) are in that sense an important part of this as well as previous syllabuses in history.

However, there remains debate over the extent to which curricular changes since the 1960s, which at times placed history in a social studies context, have made an impact on teaching practices. Therefore it is of interest to investigate whether the public history culture that was established in the nineteenth century and used as the major paradigm for history in schools at least until the 1960s, as described above, can still be observed in how our informants formulate their own views of Swedish history today. Case studies conducted recently have indicated that there is a selective tradition in history teaching in upper primary school that has remained centred on earlier Swedish history and the growth of the Swedish state (Stolare, 2014).

Study design, data collection and method

The informants were asked to respond in writing to two prompts:

1. 'Tell Sweden's history up to the present the way you remember it, view it or understand it. You may use words and images to tell this story in any way you want and have forty minutes to complete this assignment.'
2. 'Summarize Sweden's history up to the present in two sentences. You have ten minutes to complete this assignment'. (cf. Létourneau, 2006: 72–3).

Most of the answers were collected from nine different classes of adolescents aged 12–14. The classes came from different areas of Sweden, and informants varied as regards social class, urban/rural locations and whether they were immigrants or Swedish-born residents. In total, 161 adolescents responded. The same prompts were also given to 21 adult informants (9 middle-aged informants and 12 pensioners over the age of 65). The informants were gathered

through snowball sampling (Bryman, 2012: 424). Everyone was asked to answer anonymously and the data was collected between 2014 and 2016.

Relating the informants' narratives to the theory

The texts produced by the informants draw on a shared 'stock of stories' and, as stated earlier, these can be seen as 'cultural tools' that can be activated as needed (Wertsch, 2002: 55–7).

The first analytical step was to identify the narrative components that appear in the material (cf. Létourneau, 2006). The analysis is centred on three aspects:

- How and when the historical narrative starts
- Occurrences of significant breaks (turning points or important changes)
- How and when the 'present' begins.

Using these aspects, we could identify six 'chapters', present to varying degrees, in the informants' narratives. These were interpreted in relation to earlier research on history education in Sweden (Olofsson, 2011; Danielsson Malmros, 2012; Åström Elmersjö, 2013; Stolare, 2017; Samuelsson and Wendell, 2016). Based on this second step in the analysis, we then constructed a collective 'storyline', i.e. a synthesized narrative that summarizes the main features of Sweden's history as remembered by the informants (cf. Létourneau, 2006). Through repeated close readings, explanations of causation and conclusions, we were able to identify two themes as a final step in the analysis (cf. Wertsch, 2002: 57–62).

From the Ice Age to the present: Six chapters in the informants' storyline

We need to underline that the storyline consists of patterns aggregated from the material and that hardly any of the individual informants included all parts of the narrative in their accounts. The informants' storyline of Swedish history consists of six episodes, or chapters, that may be differentiated analytically (cf. Létourneau, 2006: 74–5). For each chapter, the frequency of its occurrence in the informants' texts is given in parentheses.

1: The Ice Age as natural starting point: The first 10,000 years (61/182)

After the melting of the ice sheet, the empty landmasses of Scandinavia are populated by the first inhabitants. They live a gruelling life as hunters and gatherers. An important developmental step is taken when people of the Stone Age and the early Metal Ages make the transition to agriculture.

2: The Viking Age, Christianization and the origins of the Nordic nations: Around the year 1000 (120/182)

During the Viking Age, Nordic people travel and come into contact with other cultures in the rest of Europe, through both conquests and peaceful trade relations. An important change is the conversion to Christianity. At this time the Nordic kingdoms, Denmark, Norway and Sweden, are founded.

3: Independence and Gustav Vasa: The sixteenth century as the end of the crises of the Middle Ages (128/182)

During the Middle Ages, the Nordic kingdoms are marked by continued poverty and crises. There are power struggles between rival kings and many people die from the Black Death. Attempts made to unite the Nordic kingdoms in a personal union under Danish rule form part of these crises. Swedish independence is assured when Christian II of Denmark (known in Sweden as Christian the Tyrant) is deposed by Gustav Vasa, his Swedish rival, at the start of the sixteenth century. The transition to Protestantism under Vasa's leadership further confirms independence. This is a new beginning for Sweden.

4: The warlike Swedish Empire ends in the Age of Freedom: Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Sweden (93/182)

During the Thirty Years' War, Sweden becomes a 'great power' around the Baltic Sea. The conquest of Scania in southern Sweden from Denmark is part of this period, but so are repeated wars against Russia. Kings have absolute power. The Swedish Empire ceases to exist when Sweden is defeated in the early eighteenth century. During the 'Age of Freedom', the absolute power of the monarchy is abolished and the country is instead ruled by a parliament. Culture flourishes in this period and several well-known authors, as well as the scientist Carl Linnaeus, appear on the stage of history.

5: Peace, neutrality and the development of a prosperous society: Sweden in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (85/182)

As wars cease, material development takes place: more food is produced and diseases are treated. But this development comes at the price of overpopulation and renewed poverty. The worst poverty is finally eradicated through emigration to America and industrial development. Prosperity increases under the direction of a number of Swedish inventors, such as Alfred Nobel. Thanks to sustained peace and neutrality, Sweden is able to stay out of both the world wars and continue its development.

6: Home of material progress and democracy: Sweden today (96/182)

Today, Sweden is a democratic state where men and women have universal and equal suffrage. Characteristic of the present is a high living standard shared among citizens. Prosperity and peace stand in sharp contrast to the country's poor and war-torn past. Sweden has become an attractive country, which is evident in the number of immigrants and refugees that it has received. Today, Sweden is famous in the eyes of the rest of the world for the pop group ABBA, IKEA stores, and the football player Zlatan Ibrahimović.

Examples from the informants' summarizing accounts

Many of the summarizing ten-minute accounts written by the adolescents present large parts of this narrative in compressed format, as in the following three examples:

Sweden has had an ice sheet, wars, poverty and shortages. Sweden is now rich enough, [has] no wars, [provides] assistance to refugees and support. I think today's Sweden sounds a lot better than the old one.

(12-year-old informant)

First it was the Viking Age and then Christianity came and then the Middle Ages and then Gustav Vasa's time when he took money from the church. Then it was the Swedish Empire and then Sweden won loads of wars but then they lost loads of wars and then it was the Age of Freedom when Sweden was liberated from absolute kings and then people could vote and then it was the nineteenth century and then trains were invented and people started growing potatoes and then loads of Swedes moved to America because there was too little food in Sweden and then it was the twentieth century when cars, planes and electricity were invented and then [...]*

*Presumably the informant ran out of time
(12-year-old informant)

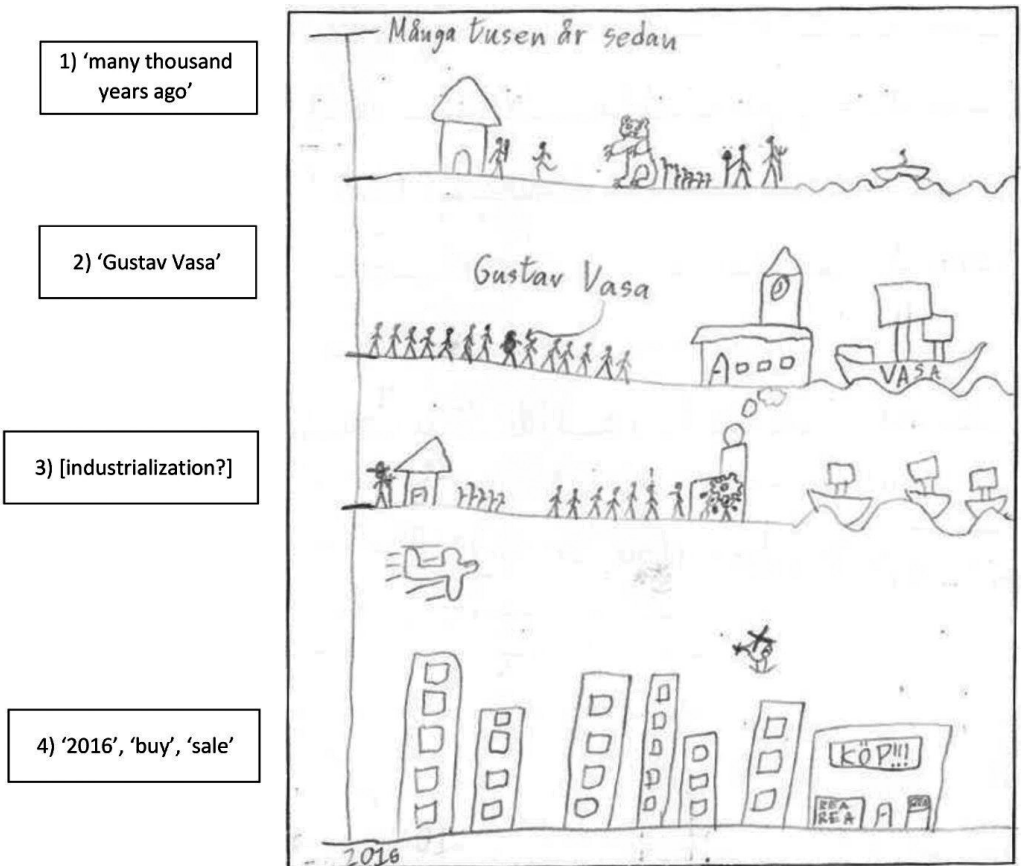


Figure 1: Response of informant, age 13

Content patterns in the narratives of the older informants

A comparison between the adolescents and the two groups of older informants is necessarily tentative, because so few middle-aged informants and pensioners were involved. Yet it may be established that the same chapters of the storyline produced by the adolescents are also present in the narratives of the two older groups – with greater detail in the group of pensioners and slightly more sketchily in the middle-aged group. This may be seen in the following summaries:

From ice age to chilly kingdom, with God on the side of the rulers, to a modern democratic welfare state that involves everyone.

(40-year-old informant)

From a loosely connected kingdom during the Viking Age with no central power ruled by warlords and clan chieftains (more or less like today's Afghanistan) [and where] the regent was arbitrarily appointed and deposed, the country became a major European power in the seventeenth century [only to become] one of the poorest European countries in the nineteenth century [and then transform] to a modern Western welfare state with a parliamentary democracy and a sovereign with no power.

(70-year-old informant)

The same story thus seems to cross generational boundaries, which indicates that its different components together comprise a 'stock of stories' retrieved from the history culture (Wertsch, 2002: 57). While all the older informants refer to the nineteenth and/or twentieth centuries in their narratives, these periods occur much less frequently in the adolescents' texts, where the twentieth century appears in 61 texts and the nineteenth century in only 33. This indicates that the break between then and now is not as clear for the older informants as for the adolescents. Even if the older informants' texts also contrast the virtues of the present with the past, the nineteenth century is for them a bridge between a distant past and the present, rather than a chasm. Some of the pensioners can also refer to their own experiences as part of history. A further marked difference is that the older groups to a higher degree demonstrate critical perspectives on Sweden's history.

Gustav Vasa, Sweden and independence: A central chapter

While a number of named persons occur as narrative abbreviations, relatively few of these persons play the role of explicit agents of history (cf. Seixas and Morton, 2013: 108–9). An important exception is Gustav Vasa, who is not just by far the most frequently named person (mentioned by 96 informants) but is also a person explicitly assigned an active role. Frequently, he is clearly considered the liberator and founder of the nation:

[...] Gustav Vasa rebelled against Christian II and managed to free Sweden. He was crowned on the 6th of June 1523. This is why Sweden's National Day is on the 6th of June.

(12-year-old informant)

As a symbol of independence, Gustav Vasa may be compared to George Washington in an American context. Previous research has yielded similar results regarding the image of this king, especially concerning the 'origins' of nations (Samuelsson and Wendell, 2016, cf. Berger and Conrad, 2015: 99).

Two prominent themes in the informants' storylines

On a more abstract level, two themes recur that create meaning in the accounts, reminiscent of what Wertsch (2002: 60–2) calls schematic narrative templates. These themes draw attention to the overall understanding the informants have of the historical development of Sweden and the meaning they derive from this. Here these two themes have been separated, but one may see them as being present simultaneously and interwoven on the concrete level of the narrative.

Theme 1: The long peace

Nearly all informants describe or mention Sweden's earlier wars. Even if far from everyone mentions the two-hundred-year peace explicitly – Sweden has not been to war since 1814 – just about all texts contrast the present peace with a warlike past:

Sweden's history has been very varied during the years. Before there were a lot of wars and Sweden was big, but since the 1800s there has been peace and Sweden is smaller.

(12-year-old informant)

The 'Age of Freedom' during the eighteenth century often signals the start of the new peaceful era, and it is sometimes depicted as if Swedes have learned something of the past and now focus on the development of knowledge:

During the Vasa Era, Vasa and his sons reigned and during the Age of Empire we were a big, powerful country and when we went over to the Age of Freedom it was to be the end of wars and it was, more or less, but we learned from our mistakes and started becoming researchers instead.

(12-year-old informant)

Most of the informant narratives were collected in 2015–16, a period that coincided with the arrival of a record number of refugees in Sweden. This circumstance is reflected in the informants' narratives and strengthens the image of Sweden as a country of peaceful exception. In contrast to the countries they flee from, people may feel safe in Sweden:

Now Sweden is a rather rich country which accepts many refugees.

(13-year-old informant)

Theme 2: Narratives of progress

Another theme may be labelled 'economic, social and political progress'. Among the adolescents this theme was prevalent: it played a significant role in 109 of the 161 submitted answers. Although the theme of progress can hardly be said to be more common than that of peace, it does seem to be more complex. Here, we highlight three variants of the narrative of progress, namely those concerning economic, technological and political developments.

Most common are narratives of progress based on the idea of economic development. Here Sweden is seen to have advanced from a poor country to a rich one, from a developing country to a developed nation:

Sweden went from a poor farming country to an industrial country and the products Sweden sells are wood, iron and ore.

(12-year-old informant)

Economic development is also the reason why Sweden became a destination for immigration, but here the financial incentives for migration are highlighted, and from time to time one suspects that informants may see immigration as a problem:

Sweden has changed a lot with the economy, before Sweden was poor, but now people want to move to Sweden to work, earn money and start families. Sweden used to be sparsely populated, but now the whole of Sweden is full.

(13-year-old informant)

Another variant of the narrative of progress lies close to that of economic change, but instead emphasizes the importance of scientific and technological development. Frequently, these are described in terms of changes to everyday life, with the informant focusing on the manner in which acquiring clothes and food has changed over time, from having to hunt to purchasing the necessary supplies in a shop. In this kind of reasoning, the past and the present tend to be polarized, with the past as static and poor compared with the present.

A variation on the theme of progress and economy is expressed when the domestic development of the natural sciences is connected to the development of the country itself. Here a national connection emerges, something that some of the informants seem to be proud of:

Sweden is a healthy and rich country and we have many natural resources. We develop more and more and we have discovered at least ten elements in the periodic table.

(12-year-old informant)

A third variation on the theme of progress portrays Sweden in terms of democracy and equality. The informant below emphasizes the democratic development in Sweden as an important aspect of progress:

In my opinion the biggest difference is in how the country is governed. From being governed by a single person, to involving a few more, back to only one, and then that only men could be involved and finally that women also got the right to participate.

(13-year-old informant)

Alternative images of Sweden?

Even if the overwhelming majority of the informants' answers follow the storyline and the themes described above, there are some dissenting voices too. These are few in number (11/182), but nevertheless clear. Among the dissenting voices, two trends may be noted: one group questions the idea of progress, and the other critiques the historical narrative itself. Critique of the idea of progress comes as an addition to the already-described theme of progress:

Sweden has developed very quickly and very well, from being at war to a democracy, to the present where there are not that many problems in Sweden, if one ignores environmental problems.

(13-year-old informant)

The other trend typically views the present as a period of deterioration compared with earlier periods. These answers share a sense of discrepancy between the narrative about Sweden and the informants' own experiences. Sometimes this is supported by referring to historical events, such as the transportation of German troops from Norway to Finland via neutral Sweden during the Second World War, or by pointing out that the indigenous Sami people of the north of Sweden are excluded from the narrative.

Discussion: 'Goodest country in the world?'

The two themes that emerge from the informants' answers – peace and progress – may be compared with earlier research from other countries (Wertsch, 2002; Wertsch, 2004; Létourneau and Moisan, 2004; Sant *et al.*, 2015; Holmberg, 2016), and echo the notion of Sweden being among the 'goodest' countries in the world (cf. Siret, 2016). While informants in Russia, Estonia, Québec, Catalonia and Uganda describe their country or region as threatened, the Swedish informants portray Sweden as a country that has left conflict behind. Sweden appears as a pioneer of modernity, morality and welfare, reminiscent of US and Japanese narratives that portray their nations as pioneers of modernity, especially in fields such as economics and politics (Berger and Conrad, 2015: 4).

The explanation for these differences may lie in the differing actual historical circumstances of the respective countries. In the Swedish case, the country has not been exposed to the same external and internal pressures that many other countries have faced. For instance, Sweden as a whole has never been occupied by a foreign power, although different groups have certainly rebelled against those in power, a trend continuing into modern times.

Alongside this explanation, reasons may also be sought in the history culture as established during the nineteenth century and perhaps most clearly expressed in Gustav Vasa's role as a unifying symbol for the country. At the same time, ideas about Sweden are plastic and adaptable to the time one lives in. This becomes clear in the two themes expressed by the informants. The result echoes earlier examinations of Swedish history culture. Sweden, the country that accepts refugees, is a natural heir to Sweden, the exemplary welfare state. That Sweden therefore has gone from being a geopolitical superpower to a world-leading industrial welfare state and then to a moral superpower corresponds to the self-image of upper secondary students (Danielsson Malmros, 2012: 363). This result may be seen in the light of an older academic history tradition in Sweden, consisting of a 'Whig' reading of history, entailing basic assumptions about progress in which peace, freedom and prosperity have been central nodes (Björk, 2012: 101). The idea of progress in the informant texts is also reminiscent of how American pupils describe the course of history as a simple development in the direction of the good present (Barton, 2008: 197–8); the Swedish results in this study could hence probably be seen in the light of a more general trend in western/European societies where the 'temporal form of othering' (i.e. the 'others' were there and then, 'we' are here and now) in the post-war era for a long time dominated over otherization based on geographical or cultural differences (Diez, 2004).

School, history culture and intergenerational perspectives

Létourneau and Moisan (2004) reason that a general historiographic tradition influences teaching in schools to a high degree, thus challenging the intentions of history curricula. In the present study a number of intergenerational themes may be noted. Our informants have attended school over such a span of time that they represent at least six different history syllabuses. Despite this, there are significant similarities in the answers they provide. We see this as the result of a dominant history culture, manifested in similar teaching practices despite the changing of curricula. The informants' answers correlate with the selective traditions followed in history teaching as far as selection of content is concerned. Teaching revolves around a national narrative with recurrent dimensions, such as the development of central power, the heroic acts of kings and national independence (Englund, 1986; Stolare, 2014).

This may be understood as a surprising result. Since the 1960s, heated public debates have periodically centred on history teaching in schools and the curricula mentioned in the introduction have also been changed since the debate began (Tingsten, 1969; Englund, 1986; Samuelsson, 2016). Despite the fact that a key feature of this debate has involved questioning teaching about ‘kings and war’, the changes have focused largely on lower and upper secondary school (Olofsson, 2011; Nygren, 2011; Stolare, 2017). By contrast, the history that primary students were being taught at the start of the twentieth century was a conscious investment in nation-oriented teaching of older political history. This situation has also influenced other aspects of the history culture. Nobel laureate Verner von Heidenstam’s book *The Swedes and Their Chieftains* (1908–10, the title of which is paraphrased in this article’s title), printed and reprinted in hundreds of thousands of copies until 1955 and used as a set text, was a clear example of this. In this book the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth century are summarized in only eight pages, while the previous centuries span 332 pages, most of which concentrate on different regents and the wars they fought (Tingsten, 1969: 244).

The absent nineteenth century: Null curriculum

The rise of modern Sweden during the nineteenth century appears as a subject still rather obscure to the participating informants, indicating that this period is still seldom taught, at least to the younger informants. This may therefore be seen as an example of a ‘null curriculum’ – an untreated area – in history teaching (cf. Eisner, 1996: 60; Parkes, 2011: 39–42). The downplaying, or absence, of the nineteenth century is therefore also one of the main findings of our study. Informants portray the peace and progress of present-day Sweden as something that is radically different from pre-nineteenth-century conditions, yet most informants provide no points of reference between now and then: few conflicts, no agreements, few victories or defeats. Sweden as a state of exception, located outside the conflicts of the world, appears on a deeper level to be the innermost kernel of collective memory in these narratives (cf. Karlsson, 2014). The few exceptions to these patterns are found mostly among the older informants, indicating that the more extended syllabus for secondary schools could provide students with a more elaborated view on the past. Another explanation could be that the life experiences of the adult informants have made them more aware of changes over time, especially those that occurred in the late twentieth century.

Sweden’s history: Taking a neonationalist turn?

The narratives told by our informants may be seen as a type of mirror on a shared past, or a collective memory. As shown by earlier research, collective memories tend to downplay conflict and internal disagreements in the community concerned, which is also the case here (cf. Conrad *et al.*, 2013; Wertsch, 2002).

As late as 2005, the National Day became a public holiday in Sweden, and nationalist currents have also in other ways come to the fore in public opinion in recent years. It is likely that this reflects a general European tendency towards neonationalism, but it is also built on questioning immigration politics in Sweden. Defenders of a multicultural society are ready to resist this trend. The relatively vague and conflict-free portrayal of Sweden’s road to the present may in other words be subject to pressure. Two public debates during the autumn of 2016 about Swedish history and cultural heritage support this notion. Issues debated included, for instance, whether the concept of a ‘Great Power’ should be used in the syllabus, and the role of museums in transmitting ideas about nationality (Siwe, 2016; Emilsson and Karlsson, 2016).

It remains to be seen whether this will lead to new interpretations of the older history culture, or whether new, alternative narratives will take shape. It is not certain to what extent such renegotiations will also lead to changes in the teaching of history. One imaginable scenario is that schools in the future will keep to a narrative of kings and wars that plays out in a familiar past, radically different from the uncertain present.

Notes on the contributors

Hans Olofsson is a PhD candidate in history with educational/didactical aims at Karlstad University, Sweden. His research concerns students' conceptions of performed history education and its relationship to curriculum development.

Johan Samuelsson is associate professor in history at Karlstad University. His research concerns younger students' conceptions of history and assessment and different aspects of teaching from a historical perspective.

Martin Stolare is associate professor in history at Karlstad University. His area of research is history education in primary school.

Joakim Wendell is a PhD candidate in history with a focus on history education at Karlstad University. His interests centre on assessment and on causal reasoning in teaching and learning history.

References

- Åström Elmersjö, H. (2013) *Norden, nationen och historien: Perspektiv på föreningarna Nordens historieläroboksrevision 1919–1972*. PhD thesis, Umeå universitet.
- Barton, K.C. (2008) 'Narrative simplifications in elementary students' historical thinking'. In Levstik, L.S. and Barton, K.C. *Researching History Education: Theory, method, and context*. New York: Routledge, 183–208.
- Barton, K.C. (2012) 'Wars and rumors of war: The rhetoric and reality of history education in the United States'. In Taylor, T. and Guyver, R. (eds) *History Wars and the Classroom: Global perspectives*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 187–202.
- Berger, S. and Conrad, C. (2015) *The Past as History: National identity and historical consciousness in modern Europe*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berggren, H. (2001) 'Den framåtvända ängeln: Nationalism och modernitet i Sverige under 1900-talet'. In Almqvist, K. and Glans, K. (eds) *Den svenska framgångssagan?* Stockholm: Fischer and Co, 71–86.
- Björk, R. (2012) 'Hjärne-traditionen'. In Artéus, G. and Åmark, K. (eds) *Historieskrivningen i Sverige*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 59–106.
- Bohman, S. (1997) *Historia, museer och nationalism*. Stockholm: Carlsson.
- Bryman, A. (2012) *Social Research Methods*. 4th ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Conrad, M., Ercikan, K., Friesen, G., Létourneau, J., Muise, D., Northrup, D. and Seixas, P. (2013) *Canadians and Their Pasts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Danielsson Malmros, I. (2012) *Det var en gång ett land ... Berättelser om svenskhet i historieläroböcker och elevers föreställningsvärldar*. Höör: Agerings.
- Diez, T. (2004) 'Europe's others and the return of geopolitics'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 17 (2), 319–35.
- Eisner, E.W. (1996) *Cognition and Curriculum Reconsidered*. 2nd ed. London: Paul Chapman.
- Emilsson, A. and Karlsson, M. (2016) 'Museer är ingen politisk plattform'. *Expressen Debatt*, 31 December. Online. www.expressen.se/debatt/museer-ar-ingen-politisk-plattform/ (accessed 3 April 2017).
- Englund, T. (1986) *Curriculum as a Political Problem: Changing educational conceptions, with special reference to citizenship education*. PhD thesis, Uppsala University.

- Éthier, M.-A. and Lefrançois, D. (2012) 'How should citizenship be integrated into high school history programs? Public controversies and the Québec History and Citizenship Education curriculum: An analysis'. *Canadian Social Studies*, 45 (1), 21–42.
- Evans, R.W. (2004) *The Social Studies Wars: What should we teach the children?* New York: Teachers College Press.
- Holmberg, U. (2016) *Significant History and Historical Orientation: Ugandan students narrate their historical pasts*. Licentiate thesis, Karlstad University.
- Karlsson, K.-G. (2011) 'Historical consciousness: The fundament of historical thinking and history teaching'. In Nordgren, K., Eliasson, P. and Rönqvist, C. (eds) *The Processes of History Teaching*. Karlstad: Karlstad University Press.
- Karlsson, K.-G. (2014) 'Historia, historiedidaktik och historiekultur: Teori och perspektiv'. In Karlsson, K.-G. and Zander, U. (eds) *Historien är närvarande: Historiedidaktik som teori och tillämpning*. Lund: Studentlitteratur, 13–89.
- Létourneau, J. (2006) 'Remembering our past: An examination of the historical memory of young Québécois'. In Sandwell, R.W. (ed.) *To the Past: History education, public memory, and citizenship in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 70–87.
- Létourneau, J. and Moisan, S. (2004) 'Young people's assimilation of a collective historical memory: A case study of Quebecers of French-Canadian heritage'. In Seixas, P. (ed.) *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 109–28.
- Linderborg, Å. (2001) *Socialdemokraterna skriver historia: Historieskrivning som ideologisk maktresurs 1892–2000*. PhD thesis, Uppsala universitet.
- Nakou, I. and Apostolidou, E. (2010) 'Debates in Greece: Textbooks as the spinal cord of history education and the passionate maintenance of a traditional historical culture'. In Nakou, I. and Barca, I. (eds) *Contemporary Public Debates over History Education*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 115–31.
- National Agency for Education (2011) *Curriculum for the Compulsory School, Preschool Class and the Recreation Centre, 2011* (Lgr 11). Stockholm: National Agency for Education. Online. www.skolverket.se/publikationer?id=2687 (accessed 3 April 2017).
- Nygren, T. (2011) *History in the Service of Mankind: International guidelines and history education in upper secondary schools in Sweden, 1927–2002*. Umeå: Umeå University.
- Olofsson, H. (2011) *Fatta historia: En explorativ fallstudie om historieundervisning och historiebruk i en högstadielklass*. Karlstad: Karlstads universitet.
- Olofsson, H. (2014) 'Narrativa förkortningar i historieundervisningen: Några möjligheter och problem'. In Kvande, L. (ed.) *Faglig kunnskap i skole og lærerutdanning: Nordiske bidrag til samfunnsfag- og historiedidaktikk*. Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 53–84.
- Pandel, H.-J. (2014) 'Geschichtskultur'. In Mayer, U., Pandel, H.-J., Schneider, G. and Schönemann, B. (eds) *Wörterbuch Geschichtsdidaktik*. 3rd ed. Schwalbach: Wochenschau Verlag.
- Parkes, R.J. (2007) 'Reading history curriculum as postcolonial text: Towards a curricular response to the history wars in Australia and beyond'. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 37 (4), 383–400.
- Parkes, R.J. (2011) *Interrupting History: Rethinking history curriculum after "the end of history"*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Rüsen, J. (1994) *Historische Orientierung: Über die Arbeit des Geschichtsbewusstseins, sich in der Zeit zurechtzufinden*. Köln: Böhlau.
- Rüsen, J. (2013) *Historik: Theorie der Geschichtswissenschaft*. Köln: Böhlau.
- Samuelsson, J. (2016) 'History wars in Sweden? A syllabus debate about nation, history and identity'. *Historical Encounters: A Journal of Historical Consciousness, Historical Cultures, and History Education*. Accepted for publication.
- Samuelsson, J. and Wendell, J. (2016) 'A national hero or a wily politician? Students' ideas about the origins of the nation in Sweden'. *Education 3–13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 1–13.
- Sant, E., González-Monfort, N., Santisteban Fernández, A., Pagès Blanch, J. and Oller Freixa, M. (2015) 'How do Catalan students narrate the history of Catalonia when they finish primary education?'. *McGill Journal of Education*, 50 (2–3), 341–62.

- Seixas, P. (2000) 'Schweigen! Die kinder! Or, does postmodern history have a place in the schools?' In Stearns, P., Seixas, P. and Wineburg, S. (eds) *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and international perspectives*. New York: New York University Press, 19–37.
- Seixas, P. and Morton, T. (2013) *The Big Six: Historical thinking concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.
- Siret, M. (2016) 'Sweden officially the "goodest" country in the world, study says'. *The Independent*, 2 June. Online. www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/sweden-goodest-country-in-world-good-country-index-a7061341.html (accessed 3 April 2017).
- Siwe, M. (2016) 'Galet av Skolverket att överge stormaktstiden'. *Expressen Ledare*, 29 December. Online. www.expressen.se/ledare/malin-siwe/galet-av-skolverket-att-overge-stormaktstiden/ (accessed 3 April 2017).
- Stolare, M. (2014) 'På tal om historieundervisning: Perspektiv på undervisning i historia på mellanstadiet'. *Acta Didactica Norge*, 8 (1), Article 9, 1–19.
- Stolare, M. (2017) 'Did the Vikings really have helmets with horns? Sources and narrative content in Swedish upper primary school history teaching'. *Education 3–13: International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 45 (1), 36–50.
- Stråth, B. (2001) 'Neutralitet som självförståelse'. In Almqvist, K. and Glans, K. (eds) *Den svenska framgångssagan?* Stockholm: Fischer and Co, 165–79.
- Tingsten, H. (1969) *Gud och fosterlandet: Studier i hundra års skolpropaganda*. Stockholm: Norstedt.
- Wertsch, J.V. (2002) *Voices of Collective Remembering*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wertsch, J.V. (2004) 'Specific narratives and schematic narrative templates'. In Seixas, P. (ed.) *Theorizing Historical Consciousness*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 49–62.
- Zander, U. (2001) *Fornstora dagar, moderna tider: Bruk av och debatter om svensk historia från sekelskifte till sekelskifte*. Lund: Nordic Academic Press.



Related articles published in the London Review of Education

This paper was published in a special feature called 'Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'.

The articles in the feature are as follows:

- Angier, K. (2017) 'In search of historical consciousness: An investigation into young South Africans' knowledge and understanding of "their" national histories'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Dawes Duraisingh, E. (2017) 'Making narrative connections? Exploring how late teens relate their own narratives to the historically significant past'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Goldberg, T. (2017) 'The useful past in negotiation: Adolescents' use of history in negotiation of inter-group conflict'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Grever, M. and Van der Vlies, T. (2017) 'Why national narratives are perpetuated: A literature review on new insights from history textbook research'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Holmberg, U. (2017) "'I was born in the reign...": Historical orientation in Ugandan students' national narratives'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Létourneau, J. and Chapman, A. (2017) 'Editorial – Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Lévesque, S. (2017) 'History as a "GPS": On the uses of historical narrative for French Canadian students' life orientation and identity'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).

- Olofsson, H., Samuelsson, J., Stolare, M. and Wendell, J. (2017) 'The Swedes and their history'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Sheehan, M. and Davison, M. (2017) "'We need to remember they died for us": How young people in New Zealand make meaning of war remembrance and commemoration of the First World War'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Van Havere, T., Wils, K., Depaepe, F., Verschaffel, L. and Van Nieuwenhuysse, K. (2017) 'Flemish students' historical reference knowledge and narratives of the Belgian national past at the end of secondary education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).
- Wertsch, J.V. (2017) 'Foreword – Negotiating the nation: Young people, national narratives and history education'. *London Review of Education*, 15 (2).