

AN IDEALIST TRADITION MEETS 1990s REALITIES. Swedish National Report on Unemployed Graduates

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The first part of this report is concerned with the case study of Matthias. Starting with a contextualising of Matthias' family background and adult life within Swedish history and culture, the report then focuses on his personal responses and strategies, as these arise in his narrative. The second part of the report widens the discussion to other graduates in the sample, presenting their profiles, and then some key themes which emerged from their interviews.

Matthias' Life and Background

Family background linking religious and popular movements

His parents were born in 1941 and 1945 respectively, and met in 1957 in Dalsland. His mother, who came from a religious family, was a nurse, and his father worked with the Lutheran church mission, and travelled extensively in the Third World. Matthias (b. 1969) had a brother two years older, and a sister adopted from Ethiopia as an infant.

Matthias' maternal grandparents were profoundly involved in religious affairs and occupied a particular religious position in the rural community. When his maternal grandfather died prematurely his grandmother moved with her five children back to Goeteborg from where she originated. Matthias' mother was five years old at the time. She was deeply influenced by her mother's religiosity, which also affected her own later family life, in the timing of her marriage and the choice of a husband who was a Lutheran missionary. Dynamic popular movements of the revivalist, temperance or labour kind developed in Sweden in the late 19th century. The Lutheran missionary work of Matthias' father was in line with popular movement activities, which often linked to the liberal and social democratic parties, and put people of lesser education and social standing right in the centre of decisive currents in the affairs of state and society. His parents are highly successful in their professional and family activities in spite of their mobility and their extra responsibility in adopting an Ethiopian infant girl.

Family background in the context of rural-urban mobility

During the 1950s and still more during the 1960s there is an accelerating exodus from rural areas and agrarian occupations to urban areas and employment in industry and services. This resulted from a comprehensive agrarian act in 1947. Employment in industry reached a peak in 1965 when 46% of the actively employed population was to be found in the secondary sector. Yet the pull of industry gradually petered out as technological advance reduced the need for labour. In any case the idea of industry as the major employer of people from rural areas and in particular farmers turned out to be quite exaggerated. Although Matthias' paternal grandfather leaves his bankrupt rural shop and does industrial work in a multinational company, Electrolux,

before he dies Matthias' parents have moved directly into the service sector, in a prototypical pattern.

World-wide mobility within the ideological context of Sweden's external relations

In 1978 the family spends a year in India. In the summer of 1986 they go to Marrakesh, and Matthias stops over in Paris for one month where he works for the Lutheran church

Matthias' parents were not politically active and symptomatically Matthias does not even now know what political party they voted for. Politics was not much discussed. However, their activities, and in particular his father's activities in the Third World, represent a moral engagement in tandem with the currents of the time. His father's film-documentation of situations and events at a micro level in the Third World entailed a deep subjective involvement with everyday conditions - dangers as well as celebrations. Their daughter was adopted at the time of the turbulence preceding the downfall of Haile Selassie. Objective conditions meant that she would have to face an entirely new and strange world that might be neither understanding nor very tolerant. The whole family would have to encounter the wide scope of existential tests that Swedish society was facing at the time.

A new policy programme for a culturally pluralist society was presented in 1975 by the government. It bore the mark of its author, who was the head of the immigration agency and a man reputed to be exceptionally enlightened on the issue of multiculturalism. Political refugees had been coming *en masse* from Chile, Uganda and the Middle East. Ethiopia was the oldest and one of the most comprehensive of Swedish development assistance targets, which meant that it was a familiar country to the Swedish public. The adoption, which appeared to have been taken somewhat on the spur of the moment, was in other words safe from every theoretical aspect. Confronting its practical implications in the everyday Swedish milieu was another matter, which the family had to cope with all on its own. The sister has indeed been maladjusted for long periods of time. However, Matthias is now relieved because she is now attending a folk high school to finish off her education, which she was not able to do when she went to the ordinary school. She appears comparatively satisfied with her situation.

Since the early 1960s Sweden's foreign policy and ideological orientation in the world switched from passive to active neutrality. Its attempt at a rather pro-active neutrality policy in Europe during the early 1950s having failed, Sweden's foreign policy receded into a watch-and-see passivity which only sought to excel in formalist references to abstract principles of international law. The political emancipation of the Third World in the 1960s challenged such a 'lofty' approach to social policy. Nascent development strategies in the Third World offered Sweden a pioneering role, given her politically 'clean' and ideologically progressive background, whereas in Europe she could at best play second fiddle and where the advanced Swedish model was only of academic interest.

Matthias and his family could therefore let themselves be positively engulfed by the Indian environment later in the 1970s. Matthias' discoveries of India at the age of eight to nine would represent a basis for a reflexive life trajectory. During his travel to Marrakech and Paris in his

mid teens he also discovered the Third World in the First World, as a natural concomitant to the religious links of his family.

Matthias' rapport with technical subjects and human ecology

In 1986 Matthias begins at a new technical school, where he lives with his classmates. In 1989 he begins to study engineering at university, and he refuses to do military service, opting for social service as a conscientious objector. He moves to Goeteborg with his girlfriend, who is adopted from Korea. He switches to human ecology, and takes out a study loan to go to India for a semester with his girlfriend, to study biogas in villages.

His ease with technical thinking, with friends and with sports meant that he did not have to strain himself unduly to cope with either school or leisure activities. But this subjective disposition later had to confront the objective requirements of the adult world, in terms of university studies and the intolerant and unfair academic milieu. Here he encountered a lack of concern for the burning issues of the world outside, or for the lack of jobs and the ailing economy. Nor did he find much consideration for his responsibilities for his Korean girl-friend, who met with a car accident and a possible life-long injury. His harmonious, generous and functional family background had not prepared him for cut-throat competition either in games or in real life. Hence his trajectory from technical particularity to a holistic approach through human ecology seemed natural enough. But this also entailed a burden of intellectual responsibility, which the academic world would not automatically support. So he assumed a double burden without any visible reward in terms of academic recognition or financial support. At the same time human ecology remains an ideologically very respected discipline from an official point of view, since Sweden still prides herself in being at the environmental forefront. He is once again in an idealist ambit, which is highly consonant with the ideology of society but offers few rewards apart from what the individual him/herself may achieve on the basis of his/her own strength. This is the dilemma he faces at the point of embarking upon a research journey to India.

Insecurity as the hallmark of the 1990s

Matthias is turned down when he applies for a job in industry, as a consequence, in his description, for his not having done his military service. He takes out various study loans. In 1995 he gets a taxi-drivers' licence and joins the trade union, to qualify for unemployment benefit. In 1996 he is accepted as a doctoral student.

Insecurity now pervades all European societies, as the current social science literature testifies. A series of changes in the social system during the past ten years have thrown doubt about both the present and future into the minds of Swedish citizens, who have been used to a predictable and safe model of society. The first signs of a crack in the Swedish model began in the mid-1980s with demands separate from those of the trade union collective being made by individual unions. Policies of deregulation and adjustment to a global economy followed during the latter half of the 1980s. The traumatic murder of the prime minister Olof Palme in February 1986 disrupted a sense of political and conceptual continuity. The soul-searching that followed has led nowhere, but has generated distrust of Swedish legal agencies. The realization that

Sweden is hopelessly drawn into global affairs, where independent models like Sweden's do not count, has caused one form of fatalism. On another count the incompetent handling of the new deregulated conditions caused both despair and anger in the populace. The extreme austerity measures, following the plunging of the Swedish economy down to the bottom rung of industrial economies within a couple of years, paralyse any rapport between polity and people. The only remaining certainty is that nobody is safe from being thrown into unemployment, which it is extremely difficult to escape. The notions of trust and solidarity, which used to be the moral basis of social action in Sweden, are neither present nor envisioned, particularly among the age group between 20-29, according to research by Bengt Starrin. The head of the Swedish Employers' Association, Göran Thunhammar, confirmed this view in an article in the national daily *Göteborgs-Posten* (24.10.1996), pointing out that between the years 1989-93 Swedish industry lost 200 000 jobs with no new recruitment of young people.

This development contrasts starkly with the social and moral atmosphere of Matthias' childhood and adolescent years. His orientation to a holistic solution within Sweden and within global society accords well with the formation of new ideologies and radical social movements in both Sweden and the rest of Europe. For Matthias, who is an educated engineer, it would have been easy in earlier days to get a job in the export industry, but when he applies for work in ABB he is turned down for not having done his military service. This could be seen as a turning point for him, after which he is even more critical of the simplicities of technology and more ready to see the complexities inherent in the relation between ecology and society.

Matthias' self-presentation and strategies

Matthias gives a positive picture of his childhood. Although his father travels a lot, his mother stays at home, at least before the children go to school. He is conscious of the differences between his father's and his mother's families. While his mother's family cares a lot about other people, has christian values, his father's is not like that. He is under the influence of his parents' heritage, and of their curiosity and urge to do good in the new postwar urban setting..

When starting school he knows his brother has been bullied, and he is determined not to succumb to his brother's fate. He is aware of his sister's difficulties and the need to protect her as someone who differs.

Matthias experiences the return from India to Sweden as a cultural shock. His father starts his own private enterprise, and his mother returns to her professional career. Matthias makes his first confrontation with ambiguities in life. The wonderful life in an Indian village, which raises his capacity for emotional expression and sensibility, is deeply missed as he bumps into the cold and awkward reserve of his Swedish peers. He is reinforced in the conviction of the need to protect his sister. Meanwhile his middle school years are spent within an aspiring middle class family life, with no political bias but a strong moral orientation. Despite the family's extensive experiences of the world, politics is never discussed. Matthias feels the urge to adjust to mainstream activities even while he remains perfectly loyal to family values. He has no need or inclination for even the slightest rebellion.

Technology, which is easy and fun, is his first path in life. Music and some sports, preferably badminton, played for enjoyment rather than to win, are his main route to friends. He then drops sport to let himself be absorbed by music. When his friends turn to hard-rock, he turns to synth, even writing his own lyrics, but they continue to respect each other despite these different tastes.

The summer journey to Marrakesh and Paris when he is in his mid-teens provides a different direction from Europe and Africa, which the family explores together. Ecumenical friends in Paris provide a shield for Matthias, who for the first time confronts and discovers the social world of *la banlieue*. The importance of his stay in Paris is that Matthias is offered an opportunity to discover for himself what he can make of his early experience of foreign lands and cultures, and come to terms with his aversion to the French language. His parents put a lot of trust in him by letting him do a job as a caretaker/janitor in Paris.

He lets teachers rival his parents as guiding stars. He is inspired by some of them, which is important as he alone among his friends is going on to higher education. But by the time he goes to a special technical school, where he appreciates the close connection between theory and practice, he becomes critical of technology. This follows a national campaign and referendum about the use of nuclear power, a question which the teachers at the school try to avoid.

When he is turned down for a job as technician, he opts for his second choice, to continue his studies at university level. His first examination in mathematics went badly but after that it was all fun, as usual or even more so. Now he meets his girlfriend, who is adopted from Korea and now studying international marketing. His moral integrity is put to the test when he is called up for military service, but he renounces and becomes a conscientious objector. In moving from his new school for the technically adept and in his rejection of the military he observes moral continuity. But neither life nor the world are straightforward as far as his inclinations are concerned and he is beginning to see the ambiguities in more stark colours than at any earlier time.

Back at the university he finishes his exams as an engineer, but something is missing. His girlfriend pushes him and their life to Göteborg and higher studies. He is only half-heartedly attracted to the university of technology, which has a high reputation, and to the world of technical solutions. The more complex the world appears the more he is drawn to the positive and in a sense primordial emotions, which he has preserved since his year in India as a child. But although the ambiguities and contradictory messages of the academic world annoy him, the freedom and relative scope to realise goals of an ultimate existential importance to the benefit of the light in his life, India, drives him to make sacrifices.

His girlfriend is an adopted child from Korea who has foster parents in provincial Sweden. She is more determined than he is about realising goals which will lead to results in professional life. However she meets with a car accident, from whose effects she is still suffering. For Matthias this becomes a double burden of responsibility. A girlfriend who comes from a Third World country seems a natural choice for him. At the same time his feeling of solidarity with India is growing, and he visits it anew in 1993, with his less-than-enthusiastic-girlfriend.

Matthias starts to study human ecology, and finds out that the 'wholeness' embodied in this subject is exactly what he has missed all along. There are no jobs available. He has to go to the social services to get an allowance - once he succeeds in getting money, another time he doesn't; he learns to drive and enrolls as a taxi-driver; he takes courses in different subjects just to get study-loans, to survive.

On the surface Matthias' life has been rather straight forward, even easy-going until he starts his studies in Goeteborg in human ecology. There has been a congruence between his values and the world. From childhood it was christian values that underpinned his family trajectory, together with an openness for the third world. Through his father's travels and work and later on through his adopted sister and the whole family's year in India, Matthias is in a way "condemned" to do something more than just have fun. Laughing, he says: "I would rather save the world".

His values are transformed but remain consistent in his need to do something about the world situation. He wants to use his knowledge in a positive way. When he speaks of his feeling of a homecoming in starting to study human ecology, he also tells us that his girlfriend said he got very depressed that first term. When he read about pollution, starvation and looting, he knew this was the obvious truth that he had tried to avoid through his years with technology. It was precisely this knowledge he had missed - he needed the whole picture, however painful that may be. So now he has to act, he can no longer ignore the state of the world.

So he turns back to India, but now with his girlfriend alongside him, and with his project in the use of biogas. In the company of his girlfriend he sees the difficulties of different cultures meeting, although things improve when they reach the villages and get near the people.

Back in Sweden his difficulties in getting enough money to survive become evident. He manages to get a job as a taxi-driver but it is very hard to combine this with his doctoral studies, which he is determined to pursue. He thinks a lot about his studies as in themselves a valid form of work. His formulation that "being a doctoral student is my work" protects him from being forced to look for a job which hardly exists in the market, as a technological human ecologist. He strives in his department first to get accepted, and then to get money in some way. His tutor acts as a mentor, urging him to continue with his project anyway. He is now planning his third journey to India.

During this time of trial and error he gets his family's support. His mother has been promoted as head of a section and his father has become a relatively well-ensconced private entrepreneur. Although his parents don't understand what he is doing in detail, he nevertheless has their unconditional backing. He is also determined not to fall apart or go crazy in the face of hardships. His politics appear successively more radical, which makes him grow beyond his parents' position. He sees no political party he can join wholeheartedly or even vote for, but he has joined an antiracist group and he organises trips to Germany for demonstrations.

The other cases

Patrik was born 1965 in Stockholm, where he lived until the age of one. He grew up in a lower middle class family of revivalist religious background. Sport and music (electric guitar) played a large role during his school years. He was weakly built and has succeeded by being nimble-minded and having a sharp tongue. He was an early rebel and became a leftist during adolescence and at school. He worked at the SAAB car factory and a music shop. In 1988 he moved to Goeteborg where he started a family (two children) and had odd jobs before he began academic studies. After completing his studies he received paid father's leave (a very Swedish institution) while his wife engaged in feminist studies. While focusing upon an adequate job in line with his academic training he contributes to family living by taking odd jobs and taking care of the children.

David was born in 1967 in Goeteborg. Both his mother and his stepfather and his natural father are academics with good incomes and positions. He is the oldest of three children. His mother had each of her three children with a different partner. He had a good suburban upbringing, wanted to become a professional footballer, but found studying easy. He spent one year in California at the impressionable age of 17 (he recently returned there), and tried factory work for one year after school. But he then took an MBA (business administration) plus an extra exam in media studies. He had several years of work experience in an advertising agency, a line that he now shuns. He reads a lot of quality fiction and moves in well-to-do circles, but is still looking for an adequate job.

Fredrika was born in 1970 in Kungaelv (a small suburban town 25 km to the north of Goeteborg). She has a working class family background and is the oldest of three siblings. Her family has strong links with the Social Democratic Party, in which the majority are called grey (middle-of-the-road) socialists. She has studied history, archaeology, history of ideas and ethnology. During her studies she worked as an unqualified nursing assistant. Important for her is the 'class journey' that she has made. She lives by herself in the countryside close to her parents, but is applying for work in Stockholm where there are far more opportunities for someone with a humanities background. She has a rich social life, many friends and music. She does not want to work politically as her parents do, but she has a self-assertiveness which derives from her political family background.

Kathrin was born in 1965 in the suburb of Vaestra Froelunda, Goeteborg. Her mother was a teacher at a grammar school in social sciences and her father was a civil engineer. She has a sister three years younger than her, who is an epileptic. The family moved to a smaller town, Boras, where her mother changed from teaching to working at a post office. During her gymnasium years Kathrin joined a religious sect and had difficulties in getting out of it. She began her academic career by studying pedagogics, a field which she left after a year or so. For half a year she travelled around the world - Russia, China, Indonesia, Australia - with a girlfriend, and then she married. Once her husband had concluded his civil engineering exams, they moved to Stockholm. She has a degree in media and information technology. Her father died at the age of 56 in 1992 and after that Kathrin had her first child. She now has two children, of two and four years of age. She is applying for a job as a district sales manager for a company, and is a member of the Green Party.

Summarising Themes

Here we consider a number of themes which emerge from the unfolding of the life histories:

Geographical background and mobility. Although their grandparents and even in many cases their parents grew up under rural conditions, no one has a strictly rural background. In one or two cases the families do temporarily move to the countryside, which in the 1970s/80s was regarded as a move based either on economic privilege or on environmental convictions. The interviewees themselves have moved quite flexibly between larger cities and smaller towns depending on social networks, studies and working opportunities. They were equally likely to move freely between countries, without the frictions and cultural hang-ups which the older generation experienced.

Class background and adherence. There is a preponderance of working and lower middle class backgrounds among these graduates. In two cases there was more of a teacher or academic family background. No one had a decidedly wealthy family although in one case the academic family was clearly very resourceful. In this particular case the interviewee exuded a degree of confidence, and it was more annoyance than despair that characterized his reaction to not having found adequate employment. Most of the other cases had made what in Swedish terms is commonly known as the 'class journey', but without any clearly-discernible upwards mobility. This is determined not by any conscious decision but rather by the free play of incidental factors, where curiosity is one driving force and another the 'push' of a girlfriend/boyfriend, or of another close family member or friend who is moving in the direction of higher studies.

Social life and social networks. In two cases there had been divorces in the family but both cases were men who appeared to be markedly independent-minded. Several of the graduates had a wide and solid social network - family, friends and a social environment such as the social democratic movement, or revivalist/temperance movements - from which they derived a palpable strength. Those who did not have any particular network tended to be much more vulnerable and easily victimized. Two of these cases are parents with two children each, a situation which gives them a particular rootedness and sense of direction in spite of the limitations of their social networks.

Politics and ideology. These graduates show little interest in direct participation in any political party, although political consciousness came to practically everybody during the late teenage years. One was born into the social democratic movement, which is a powerful political family. But however conscious she is of her background and however much she sticks to what is generally referred to as the 'movement', she is moving towards values she associates with the humanities. One has majored in political theory, unwittingly searching for a rationalization of his own pathway from a near destitute working class background to a technically rationalized society with certain market opportunities. Another has actively joined the Green Party after a personal/religious crisis. Some have a political orientation that is well integrated with their lifestyles and their respective existential maturation.

Religion and values. Some have a strong religious background in the family, which has rendered them more trustful than is common, also more existentially inquisitive. Others have acquired an interest in religion as a phenomenon that cannot be counted out in a secularized,

rational society. The need for a new moral debate after the severe crumbling if not yet fall of the welfare state model is indirectly articulated by most. The outside world and a deep involvement in questions of global needs and global injustice bring near-religious attitudes into the emerging value systems of the 1990s.

Health None is abusing his/her health. On the contrary most are health conscious and some well-groomed athletic types. One wanted to become a professional footballer in his teens and still looks like it. Another is an amateur cyclist, who takes part in competitions. However, several either have some ailment or live near somebody with a more severe illness or disability. One left his job as a qualified construction worker because of an ear condition, which could only grow worse if he continued in that profession. That precipitated his switching to higher education, which he had always kept as a side interest. Keeping fit and healthy seems to be part of an unreflected strategy.

Studies and work experience. Most have chosen their particular line of studies out of personal interests rather than from instrumental reasoning. Many have tested themselves for some time in working life before gaining a more burning interest in higher studies of their own choice. However, studies often became something other than they expected, entailing a considerable reorientation in their approach to life. None is studying because of parental pressure as was normal in the earlier generation. Studying various subjects has also become one way of supporting oneself.

Economic strategies. Economic issues are a big strain and most have a problem in just muddling through. There are no extravagant habits or expensive needs, but nor is survival the question. Matthias saw it as more important to use his study loan to go to India with his fiancée in order to realize ideas around his 'studies/mission', than to maintain economic security at all costs. None is dependent on their parents although sometimes loans from a relative or a friend, which are very soon paid back, become important. Combining temporary work, new study loans, unemployment benefit or social relief is taken for granted as a means to survive. The strategy has been to scrape through without losing ideals or goals. There is no shame in this economic predicament, whereas for the parents' generation, it would have been morally debasing to 'stoop' to the 'uselessness' implied by receiving social assistance. Practically all have at some point, and often more frequently, used the social allowance bureau, as another agency to be used to the full. There is, however, no deliberate system in the survival strategies of this category.

Visions and views of the future. There is a consciousness of dark perspectives looming on the global horizon. That is why some want to realize an ideal as a way to make existence meaningful, either through their profession or a side-interest. Many widen their perspectives by reading contemporary novels of high standing. A few are even contemplating 'how to make this a better world'. Most have realized but are not resigned to the conditions of today. Strangely most have faith in destiny, which could be translated into faith in the present. There also appears to be a curious but probably easily explicable confidence if not in the present polity at least in the weave and tissue of society as a whole. Cynicism has not yet reached the ranks of those classes which genuinely gained from the welfare state. Graduates between 25-30 still without a job for which they were educated, represent a group that is resourceful enough to see its own potential within the terms of the 'traditional ideals' of Swedish society.

Conclusion

These unemployed graduates reflect much of the uncomplicated optimism and relative innocence that still prevails among large groups of adults in Sweden, however much they have been hit by the current crisis and by the dismantling of the welfare state. They also indicate the possibilities that are open to anybody regardless of background. Only in one case are higher studies regarded as the self-evident option, however. In that case the year as a factory worker after *Abitur* represented a kind of *rite de passage* luxury, insuring the young man against any wrong understanding or feeling towards factory work.

It is important to note the absence of inhibition in telling a life story that describes a ‘trivial’ view retains a degree of optimism in face of a complex future that does not in reality offer too many hopeful perspectives. On the contrary, there exists deep in the national consciousness a sense of natural pride in coming from the popular rural or labouring ranks. Since the 1920s there have been several generations of Swedish so-called proletarian writers, whose fiction mirrored working class emancipation into the intelligentsia. The themes were mostly biographical, testifying to gruesome conditions, but also giving positive examples of life among the labouring class during the 1940s-50s. Working class writers constituted the avant-garde for half a century, a new class of prophets entitled to address even anticipated future evil. It is no wonder that their view view retains a degree of optimism in face of a complex future that does not in reality offer too many hopeful perspectives. In like vein, these unemployed graduates share an overall basic attitude of optimism towards society and their own chances within it, and are far more prone to integration into society than to exclusion from it.

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