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**Autor:** Bodén, Daniel  
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# Witnesses of Social Decay

## “Ordinary People”, Right-Wing Populism and Social Media

DANIEL BODÉN

### Abstract

In recent years, social media has allowed new actors to participate in the formation of public opinion. In Sweden, the number of right-wing populist Facebook-groups are increasing in numbers. Groups like *Stand up for Sweden* (Stå upp för Sverige), a Facebook-group focusing on “revealing Sweden’s failed immigration policies” now gathers around 170 000 members, which could be compared to the number of subscription readers of any medium sized Swedish daily newspaper. In the group, members share photos, news articles, personal stories and testimonies of a society on the brink of “systemic collapse”. This article provides an analysis of personal witness accounts shared within the group during the year leading up to the Swedish 2018 election. The discussion centres around three key narratives through which the myth of a systemic collapse is constructed. Doing so, I argue that such narratives have a socially therapeutic function and serve the purpose to symbolically process and resolve conflicting social experiences.

*Keywords: populism, nationalism, narrative, social media, class*

### Stand up for the ‘truth’ about immigration

In February 2017, policeman Peter Springare, writes a post on his private Facebook page that instantly makes him a Swedish national celebrity. In the post, he writes how he is tired of criminal immigrants. Furthermore, he draws links between crime and ethnicity. Drawing from his own experiences as a policeman, he argues that immigrants are the culprits behind virtually every crime he encounters, but that this is systematically ignored by the police as well as by the established news media outlets.<sup>1</sup>

1 Lundberg, Simon: Här är polisen Peter Springares kontroversiella inlägg – nu visar tusentals sitt stöd.

The post goes viral and Springare is met with harsh criticism for his sweeping generalisations. He is accused of racial agitation and suspended from his job. At the same time, he is supported by conservative agitators as well as the right-wing populist online newspaper *Nyheter Idag*. As a token of support, the Facebook-group *We who support Peter Springare* (Vi som stödjer Peter Springare) is started, where he is hailed as someone who dares to speak the ‘truth’. The group quickly gathered many members. After a month, the number of members was already up to 220 000.<sup>2</sup> However, after Springare announces that he himself no longer supports the group because of the hatred that prevails within it, the group changes its name to *Stand up for Sweden* (Stå upp för Sverige).<sup>3</sup> Today the group gathers around 168 291 members.<sup>4</sup> Based on the number of members, the group’s reach is thus comparable to the readership of a medium-sized Swedish daily newspaper.

*Stand up for Sweden* is not the only Facebook group of its kind, however. Similar groups are, for example: *WTF, clearly we should be allowed to sing the national anthem* (Vafan, klart att vi ska få sjunga Nationalsången), which has about 58 000 followers and launches itself as “a page for all of us who are tired of all the nonsense about how we should not sing our National anthem and be proud of Sweden. There is nothing that is the least racist about that”,<sup>5</sup> and *Not Racist but Realist* (Inte rasist men realist) who at the time of writing has just over 31 000 followers and states that they “bring up what is suppressed, belittled and lied about by the established parties, journalists and the politically correct elite when it comes to the issue of refugees and immigration”.<sup>6</sup>

Within the groups, members share photos, news articles and posts, often with satirical undertones or purely xenophobic displays. In addition to the memes, manipulated images and linked news articles that constitute the groups’ main content, there are also often different personal stories and shorter testimonies where people account for different events in everyday life that they view as signs of an “immigration policy” that has “gone too far”.<sup>7</sup> Besides arguing that what they identify as ‘Swedish’ is in danger, they altogether argue that the general political climate is not only limited by political correctness but that this is grounded in a pronounced “hostility” towards “ordinary people”, or rather: ethnic Swedes.

In: *Nyheter24.se*, published 7. 2. 2017, <https://nyheter24.se/nyheter/inrikes/875384-peter-springare-polisen-skrev-inlagg-facebook-stod-grupp-kritik>, 3. 1. 2020.

2 Hansson, Anna; Ståhle, Mathias; Holmberg, Henrik: Sveriges största hatgrupp på nätet styrs från Eskilstuna. In: *Eskilstunakuriren*, published 7. 12. 2017, [www.ekuriren.se/sormland/sveriges-storsta-hatgrupp-pa-natet-styrs-fran-eskilstuna](http://www.ekuriren.se/sormland/sveriges-storsta-hatgrupp-pa-natet-styrs-fran-eskilstuna), 4. 1. 2018.

3 Stå Upp För Sverige, [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185](http://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185), 18. 9. 2018.

4 Thorsén, Per: Han startade fb-gruppen “Stå upp för Peter Springare” – nu har den omvandlats till landets största hatgrupp. In: *Nerikes Allehanda*, published 7. 12. 2017, [www.na.se/artikel/orebro-lan/orebro/han-startade-fb-gruppen-sta-upp-for-peter-springare-nu-har-den-omvandlats-till-landets-storsta-hatgrupp](http://www.na.se/artikel/orebro-lan/orebro/han-startade-fb-gruppen-sta-upp-for-peter-springare-nu-har-den-omvandlats-till-landets-storsta-hatgrupp), 4. 10. 2018.

5 Vafan, klart att vi ska få sjunga Nationalsången, [www.facebook.com/pg/SjungNationalsangen/about/?ref=page\\_internal](http://www.facebook.com/pg/SjungNationalsangen/about/?ref=page_internal), 3. 1. 2020.

6 Inte rasist men realist, [www.facebook.com/pg/Inte-rasist-men-Realist-443540402493559/about/?ref=page\\_internal](http://www.facebook.com/pg/Inte-rasist-men-Realist-443540402493559/about/?ref=page_internal), 26. 3. 2019.

7 Stå Upp För Sverige, [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/about](http://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/about), 2. 10. 2018.

Testimonies of the kind mentioned above are here to be seen as statements based on an individual's own experiences and data on events that have not been subjected to any kind of revision. The aim of this article is to study and analyse the different meanings constructed within the group Stand up for Sweden, by focusing on the kind of testimonies described above, and placing these within a wider socio-economical and historical context.<sup>8</sup>

## Changing forms of narration<sup>9</sup>

The perhaps most basic prerequisite for society is communication between people. It is by exchanging thoughts about big and small that people can find common ground and form a sense of community. By telling and sharing experiences people collectively form and negotiate common knowledge, values and views through which the world becomes understandable. Through dissuasive examples and role models, ideas are conveyed about the past and how society has become the way it is. There we can also learn about who is friend, foe and what constitutes desired or unwanted future. It is also through narration that small everyday events are connected to world affairs and accounts of grand events. For this reason, it is in the everyday narration that a common view of society and the conditions of life can emerge.<sup>10</sup>

Over time, folk narration has taken place in many different arenas. It has been both verbal and non-verbal. As social forms and communication technologies have undergone changes, new narrative forms have emerged accordingly. Since the 1990s, the internet has grown into a vital arena for popular narration. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, that require people's active sharing, have become popular places for the dissemination of collective experience. In ethnology, the internet, social media and the various forms of online narration have therefore become an increasingly common field of study.<sup>11</sup> This is not only because the content of blogs, forums etc. provide easy access to people's experiences and worldviews, but also because they play an important role in people's everyday lives. What is communicated through social media platforms has consequences for everyday life by influencing how people act. For example, it has been suggested that there is a link between the spread of racist, prejudiced and anti-Ziganist internet content and the rise of physical attacks on Roma camps and hate crimes against beggars.<sup>12</sup>

8 Note that the source material for this article is originally written in Swedish and that all translations from Swedish to English are the author's own.

9 By "narration" I here refer to the communicative process by which meaning is ascribed to events and social experiences by connecting them together in a causal structure with a distinct beginning and end. By focusing on the communicative process, the products of such a process – *narratives* – here refer to collective narratives (as opposed to personal ones).

10 Arvidsson, Alf: *Folklorens former*. Lund 1999, p. 33–40.

11 Blank, Trevor J. (ed.): *Folklore and the Internet. Vernacular expression in a digital world*. Logan 2009.

12 Löow, Heléne: Anti-ziganism. Från ryktesspridning till nätkampanjer. In: *Socialmedicinsk tidskrift* 3 (2015), p. 320.

## The myth of a systemic collapse

By studying popular narration, one can get a glimpse of prevailing concepts, problems and experiences that occupy popular consciousness. When it comes to Facebook groups like *Stand up for Sweden*, the prevailing understanding of shared experiences is already explicitly formulated. The group's "main focus is to reveal the laxness among politicians towards the increasingly unsuccessful integration", and the basis for its existence is the shared desire to "make Sweden secure again".<sup>13</sup> The common knowledge that is being constructed in the group thus assumes that Sweden has become insecure, and that the reason is primarily attributable to failed integration policies.

The group description expresses an increasingly widespread description in which Sweden is approaching a 'systemic collapse', but that the truth of this collapse is subjected to media blackout and systematically hidden from the people in the political debate.<sup>14</sup> Under this overarching metanarrative, there is a small variety of recurring themes around which the various individual testimonies are organized, such as health care, pensions and crime. In this regard, the metanarrative of a systemic collapse bares the characteristics of a myth. It functions as an interpretative framework that organises the social experiences around which images of society is constructed by flattening the inherent complexity of any experience to something unambiguous.<sup>15</sup> It becomes an "expressive totality" where all parts are seen as mechanical reflections of a predetermined whole.

Given the thematic sub-narratives about 'healthcare as a death trap', 'the poor pensioner' and 'uncontrolled crime', that I will discuss in this article, the metanarrative of systemic collapse is loaded with strong moods that in part appeal to people's emotions, but also prescribe action. Therefore, I have found inspiration in the theories of literary scholar Fredric Jameson, who argues that narratives should be seen as socially symbolic acts.<sup>16</sup> Jameson argues that narratives allow people to symbolically resolve problematic experiences and imagine possible fields of action. In this way, narratives become therapeutic by helping people to collectively turn trauma and diffuse feelings of shame, despair and frustration into object-oriented emotions and clear-cut horizons of action.

My intention is to analyse the interplay between testimonies that are shared in the group and the comments they generate as a form of mythological narration where each shared experience helps to maintain the myth of a systemic collapse.

13 Stå Upp För Sverige, [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/about](https://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/about), 2. 10. 2018.

14 [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=systemkollaps&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=systemkollaps&epa=SEARCH_BOX), 3. 1. 2020.

15 Barthes, Roland: *Myth today*. In: id.: *Selected Writings*, ed. by Susan Sontag. New York 1982, p. 95.

16 Jameson, Fredric: *The Political Unconscious. Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. London, Routledge, 2002 [1981].

## Social history of narratives

The sharing of testimonies that goes on in the groups can on the one hand be understood as reactions to events in political life, where they function as a way of processing common experiences. On the other hand, as contemporary political comments, neither the form nor the content of the testimonies can be decoupled from the social reality and time in which they are given. The myth of a systemic collapse is, after all, based on concrete experiences.

Anthropologist Don Kalb proposes that the understanding of neo-nationalist sentiments cannot be based on the interpretation of dramatic headlines and party-political rhetoric, but rather through a thorough problematisation of people's lived experiences, and how these are conditioned by concrete socio-economic conditions.<sup>17</sup> He argues that neo-nationalist mobilization should be studied by looking at the "critical junctions" that occur between how people understand and organise their relationships to each other considering the current world order. Therefore, there may be reason to regard the testimonies through the perspective of social history.

Walter Benjamin has argued that any outbreak of fascism bears testimony to a failed social revolution.<sup>18</sup> The starting point here is that the testimonies, despite their xenophobic overtones, also say something about people's concrete social and material living conditions and that they could be understood as an expression of an endeavour that extends beyond the mythological *truth* around which *Stand up for Sweden* is organized. What I find interesting here is the socio-economic infrastructure that provides a fertile ground for xenophobia. Hope is, as Benjamin's counterpart Ernst Bloch has pointed out, never lost, as it is always possible to find seeds for progressive social development in the most backward phenomena.<sup>19</sup>

## Witnesses of social decay

The various thematic subnarratives discussed within *Stand Up for Sweden* are many, but some stories are more common than others. In the following sections, I will present three of the most prominent ones that resulted in discussions within the group during the year leading up to the 2018 election. I will discuss these based on posts that in the form of testimonies make claims on representing concrete lived experiences.

17 Kalb, Don: Upscaling Illiberalism. Class, Contradiction, and the Rise and Rise of the Populist Right in Postsocialist Central Europe. In: *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences* 11/3 (2018), p. 303–321.

18 Benjamin, Walter: Theories of German Fascism. On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, ed. by Ernst Jünger. In: *New German Critique. Special Walter Benjamin Issue* 17 (1979), p. 120–128.

19 Bloch, Ernst: *The Principle of Hope*. Cambridge 1995 (vol. 1).

## Healthcare as a death trap

In March 2018, a dramatic post appeared in the group. A young mother shared a post with poignant pictures of her few weeks old baby. In the pictures there was a baby. It lay with its frail little body on its back in a hospital bed, equipped with oxygen mask and hoses, and tubes attached to its arms, nose and head.

“PLEASE SHARE

This is what happens when healthcare is put aside.

We have repeatedly been sent home from the child nurse with our 4 weeks old son from the hospital. We’ve been there 4 times since Monday

He has the RSV virus. And despite having barely eaten and difficult to breathe, just lying and coughing, we have been sent home.

High pressure at the hospital? Well, probably. But that might cost someone’s life.

We finally got to [place name], but by that time he was in such a bad condition that we were immediately sent to the emergency room. It took us 3 hours to get him reasonably stable. Now he has been given assisted breathing since last Friday when we came in, and it looks as if he is going to need it several more days. The reason why people are sent home is probably because so little resources are put into the hospitals that there is a lack of staff and room. I do not see any other reason because he was so sick.

We really need to prioritize what is important in our country and one of them is care, for sure. Because this is totally sick!!”<sup>20</sup>

The pictures were moving, which was noticeable in the comment section. “Completely unacceptable” a woman commented. Many sent hugs. Others exclaimed how “insane” and “completely f\*cked up” it was.<sup>21</sup> Some took the opportunity to confirm the young mother’s experience by sharing their own stories and pictures.

“We spent 2 months in the hospital when our little daughter was born. The hospital staff did as much as they could. What we realized then was how little the government cares about sick people and those working in healthcare. We saw how doctors and nurses went on their knees for us patients. It feels so wrong seeing how sick children are sent home because of how priorities are made in the Swedish economy.

I say, if we close the borders and stop bringing in immigrants, I’m pretty sure the money is enough for our healthcare.”<sup>22</sup>

The comment reaffirmed the young mother’s experience, but also gave the poster the opportunity to simultaneously suggest how he thought the causes of the perceived healthcare fiasco should be understood. Others joined in the chorus. “The money is spent on someone else. Everyone knows who”, someone suggest-

20 [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=N%C3%A4r%20v%C3%A5rden%20l%C3%A4ggs%20%C3%A5t%20sidan%20s%C3%A5%20kan%20det%20bli%20s%C3%A5h%C3%A4r%20&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=N%C3%A4r%20v%C3%A5rden%20l%C3%A4ggs%20%C3%A5t%20sidan%20s%C3%A5%20kan%20det%20bli%20s%C3%A5h%C3%A4r%20&epa=SEARCH_BOX), 3. 1. 2020.

21 See note 20.

22 See note 20.

ed.<sup>23</sup> Someone else explained the underlying sentiment explicitly: “There are no resources anymore since all the refugees receive free healthcare, then there’s no money for the employees causing full hospital rooms but no doctors!”<sup>24</sup>

In the comment section, it became increasingly clear how the original experience was to be interpreted: The lack of healthcare was the result of those in power choosing to spend money on migration before public healthcare. The problem, however, was not only perceived as incorrect budget priorities, but also that the priorities were a form of state-sanctioned exploitation of the “Swedish people” to the benefit of immigrants. “Swedes no longer count”, a woman commented. “Just accept it. Swedish healthcare, housing, benefits, etc. are for the immigrants. We Swedes are supposed to open our hearts and pay taxes so that politicians and immigrants can get fat”, a man explained and continued: “Swedes should be given a certain deduction for tents so that we can give away our housing but still contribute work and tax revenue.”<sup>25</sup>

## The poor pensioner

In October 2018, a man posted a post that was previously shared within another group: “The Pensionary Uprising!” under the headline “The Poor Pensioner!” The post was accompanied by a photograph. In the foreground of the picture, an elderly woman stood in front of a public litterbox. She had opened the lid and reached down into the basket. In the grass around her feet lay a few empty jars and bottles, giving the impression that she was planning to collect the return from recycling them. In the background, an empty stage was visible, placing the scene before or after a social democratic meeting. A red canvas with the Social Democratic symbol of a red rose hung in the background.<sup>26</sup>

“Last night at 12:45 I was standing on the balcony smoking my last cigarette for the evening. It was calm and quiet outside. I admired the dark sky while breathing in the fresh night air. Suddenly I saw someone moving in the yard. It was the old woman again – She, whom I had seen a few times before, looking through the rubbish for recyclable cans in our yard.

My heart ached and I wondered why she had to go out at night looking for cans. What kind of life was that? I didn’t want to disturb or embarrass her, so I hid a little so that she wouldn’t see me. But I could not let go of her tragic fate.

Then I got an impulse to go out and give her money. Quickly I ran out into the hallway, took out two hundred and the keys. Then quickly down the stairwell so she wouldn’t have time to disappear. As I came down to the front door, the old woman came towards me. It turned out that she was living in the same gate as me.

23 See note 20.

24 See note 20.

25 See note 20.

26 See note 20.



We said ‘hello’ and I handed her the money. ‘I want you to have these if you accept them’, I said. She said, ‘thank you, but you didn’t have to. Yes, but I want to, I said. I’ve seen you before and it hurts my heart to see you out at night’. ‘Oh, so you’ve seen me look for empty cans before, I’m so ashamed’, she said. ‘You have nothing to be ashamed of’, I said. ‘It is the government that should be ashamed. The fact that old folks must complement their small pension by recycling cans is shameful’.

She looked at the banknote and said ‘But it’s too much I thought it was a 200 [SEK] banknote’. She thanked me several times and said I was a good person. I gave her a warm hug. ‘Yes’, she said, ‘the medicine costs so much that nothing remains afterwards’. ‘That money means more to you than to me, I can afford it’, I said. Then she thanked me several times again. She was tearful of gratitude.

She was so wonderfully nice and I thought of adopting her. We stood chatting some more by the elevator and I told her where I lived in case she needed my help at some point. Then she went up to her place and I went home to myself. The feeling that I had helped a fellow man was warm and nice, but still a feeling of anxiety was gnawing inside me.

Why should anyone have to witness something like that?! I thought about this 86-year-old woman today and wondered how it could be that the situation for our elderly people could be so bad that they have to go out in the middle of the night (to avoid being ashamed) in search for empty bottles to manage to buy vital medicines or food???

How could it have gone so far and how can older people have become so unimportant in a society that is considered a welfare society, and during a flourishing economy at that??!!!!”<sup>27</sup>

The author of the text described a nightly meeting with what, in the language commonly used within the group, could be interpreted as the losers in “the new Sweden”. In the story, the reader received a testimony about how Swedish pensions for some pensioners are not enough and how the author felt urged to intervene and help a fellow person in need.

While many comments focused on how nice it was of the poster to show her humanity to the poor pensioner, others settled with noting how sorry they were for the poor elderly woman. However, most saw the post as an expression of a wider social condition. They argued, in line with the author, that the story was pointing to the limits of what could be considered decent for a modern welfare society and that it was to be considered a political embarrassment. “The elderly don’t want to ask for help. They would certainly not visit the social services. I still can’t understand how our welfare Sweden can’t help our old people. I want something to be done about this”, a woman commented.<sup>28</sup> Another commented that it was: “Insane that Swedes have to live like that just because the medicine they need is too expensive

<sup>27</sup> See note 20.

<sup>28</sup> See note 20.

[...]”<sup>29</sup> “Unfortunately, many old people can hardly afford anything. It’s not dignified”, a third person argued.<sup>30</sup>

The comment section also included a discussion about what people had ‘earned’ through a long life of (supposed) productive work and what was perceived as implicit promises provided by the Swedish welfare model. “In my opinion, old people should have a guaranteed pension and enjoy what they have in fact worked for during their whole life. That would be the only just thing in Sweden”, a disappointed man explained.<sup>31</sup> Others continued along the same track. The comments reflected an uproar over the perceived fact that those who “built the country” did not receive what they deserved.<sup>32</sup> A significant number of members attempted to explain how that could be. If a person’s pension was supposed to be ‘deserved’, there was also an unspoken assumption that there were those who did not deserve what they received. Some were enraged by the ‘fact’ that there were people who spent their time “sitting home while collecting a pension” while “not contributing a penny”.<sup>33</sup>

The limited pension funds were perceived as unfairly distributed. There were those who claimed that the vision of social justice marketed by the Social Democracy during its heyday did not work anymore. The social democratic policy of redistribution was based on social trust, while today there were too many cheaters trying to manipulate the system. According to some group members, some were given priority and benefits just because of who they were, while others were disadvantaged. Swedish pensioners and people at the lower part of the income ladder had to pay with unfair taxes, while ‘immigrants’ either unfairly received benefits or deliberately tried to manipulate the system, is what they meant.

“Today it counts more if you are an illegal immigrant who never have and never will pay a penny in taxes. Sweden, Sweden, Motherland! For whom? Well it’s not for old worn out Swedes, that’s for sure.”<sup>34</sup>

According to the comments, the pension funds were not to be shared by everyone. At least not following the current proportions. It was suggested that the biggest reason for low pensions was that Sweden, since the 1980s, had received more and more refugees, who did not work but lived on government subsidies and on the wealth that the Swedes had produced. Some even considered themselves discriminated against and argued that Swedes were ignored and exploited.

“To be punished for having worked hard and done right for a lifetime is a scandal without precedence! The fact that people who did not contribute a single SEK get significantly more in their wallet + dental care, medical care, medicines and free housing, can only be interpreted as if the Swede is only good for paying, so bow to the new nobility.”<sup>35</sup>

29 See note 20.

30 See note 20.

31 See note 20.

32 See note 20.

33 See note 20.

34 See note 20.

35 See note 20.

Pensions were ethnified and multiculturalism was set up as the opposite of welfare. An image of the ‘ordinary Swede’ as a form of exploited class began to emerge. It was pointed out how the established parties prioritised refugees before the welfare of Swedes. Some argued that the state did not care about the Swedes at all. For example, someone suggested that the reason why the older woman could not live on her pension was because she was not an immigrant: “If the woman had had an Arabic name, then Löfvén with his entourage would send money directly to her, but now she is Swedish, so there will be no money, for sure.”<sup>36</sup>

In this context it appeared as if the expectations of the future that people associated with the current social contract – national welfare built around the taxation of individual income – had been betrayed. Such a contract was based on a moral agreement that everyone would be guaranteed a decent life in the form of financial security and independence even as their own ability deteriorated, as long as everyone else agreed to do their bit in solidarity.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, it was indirectly argued that increased ethnic differentiation in society posed a challenge to such an agreement. According to this line of thought, Swedish immigration policy meant that people who, until now, had not lived under the same social contract were given access to a welfare built by others. Immigrants were therefore perceived as a burden on the system.

## Uncontrolled crime

This perceived burden also made itself visible in the issue of crime, which had been the core reason for forming the group in the first place. In early September 2018, a week before the parliamentary elections, a young man posted this text in the group: “What kind of society are we living in? I was beaten by 6 foreigners in May when I was on my way home from my girlfriend. They even kicked me in the head when I was lying down. Now I received a message that the preliminary investigation has been closed. Is this the kind of society we want to live in and let our children grow up in? They get away with everything they do nowadays and it has to stop. We must thank our government for the fine work they have done during their term of office.”<sup>38</sup>

In the post, readers learned about the experience of a young man who had been beaten, robbed and told that the preliminary investigation had been closed. It elicited many upset reactions from group members who exclaimed that what had happened was outrageous. “Miserable! Unfortunately, this has become our everyday life. And punishment? Well, what’s that? Doesn’t seem like anyone knows”,

36 See note 20.

37 Trägårdh, Lars: The mystery of a Pippi Longstocking economy. Radical individualism in the land of social trust. In: Kurt Almqvist, Alexander Linklater (eds.): Images of Sweden. Axel and Margaret Ax:son Johnson Foundation, Stockholm 2011, p. 69–93.

38 See note 20.

someone wrote. Others corroborated the posters experience by sharing similar testimonies of their own.

In the comment section, group members testified to how violence and crime had increased. As the government seemingly turned a blind eye to reality, crime had come to pay off, the commentators argued. Why the cases were closed was not stated in the original testimony. But that didn't stop the members of the group from deciding why. "Oh you're Swedish ... who cares", someone commented sarcastically.<sup>39</sup> An older man wrote that he had experienced something similar, but that the Police did not investigate the incident even though he had evidence on camera: "When there are foreign perpetrators, the case is immediately closed under orders of the government", he claimed.<sup>40</sup> In this fashion, Swedish authorities were accused of systematically treating people differently. Immigrants, refugees and other 'non-Swedes' were seen as getting away too easily as crimes committed by them were allegedly covered up. Someone wrote: "It doesn't matter how high penalties we have here in Sweden. After all, it is only Swedes who are punished!! Unfortunately, others are exempted from Swedish laws!"<sup>41</sup>

## Another horizon

The prevailing view regarding the stories was based on a conflict of interest between 'Swedes' and 'immigrants'. While the latter, through their perceived privileges, appeared as a problem that needed to be dealt with, it was obvious that the problem could not be reduced solely to the groups of immigrants, competing for the same limited resources. The comments also reflected a structural experience of a political establishment who had abdicated their responsibility for the basic security of their citizens.

"The problem is not in all the immigrants who come to Sweden. The problem is in our political representatives. To invest in anything except what is important to the country is distressing. Today Sweden is on its way to chaos. A great deal of effort is needed in healthcare where the staff has low wages compared to our politicians. There, new savings plans are introduced each year. Cuts are made on spaces, salaries and last but not least on the staff. Therefore, waiting times grow longer.

When I think of schools I want to cry. Our children are the future of the country. Yet, there are constant classes without teachers or with teachers who have no skills, zero. Large classes to save money on staff. Poor wages mean that not many young people today want to educate themselves as teachers.

And what about the police, then? Yes, the same there. Many complain, complain and complain. You wait an hour before the police arrive. What can make them stronger. Their wages are so bad. No one or far too few people want to become policemen. Constantly working under high work loads. But here also, all we see

39 See note 20.

40 See note 20.

41 See note 20.

are budget cuts. BUT, none of our representatives seem to think it is time to place budget cuts ON THEMSELVES. They're not doing any good anyway. Soo tired that they are just babbling instead of doing anything. As long as politicians do as they do, there will be more and more such cases.

I'm really sorry. This is wrong and should not be."<sup>42</sup>

Herein, another field of tension opened up. Another conflict seemed to lay in the relationship between the citizens and the state, personified by politicians in the established parties. The blame for the problem was often pointed towards actors who were seen as responsible for the current structural situation. "It is a great shame that life could be like this for our pensioners. There are many out there who live like that [...]. Our politicians should be ashamed"<sup>43</sup> "You feel powerless. When will our politicians wake up?"<sup>44</sup> were both comments that pointed at how the fault was not with the individuals who figured in the stories, but with those who possessed the structural power to orchestrate the conditions for the perceived conflict from the outset – the politicians and their institutions. These had, above all, two serious deficiencies: their disconnectedness from the lived reality of people and their questionable morality.

The comments testified to a dissatisfaction with the lack of resources in public welfare services and high salaries among politicians. Ideas were developed about how politicians deliberately ignored ordinary people and only looked to benefit themselves. "The government steals from the pensioners, raises their own wages several times a year, and gives away what we paid in taxes for social security, but in time for the election the pensioners are shamelessly visited diligently", a woman wrote.<sup>45</sup> Group members addressed their powerlessness in relation to ignorant or greedy politicians: "Shameful of our politicians, who only enrich themselves."<sup>46</sup>

## Resolution

The society depicted through the comment sections seemed to favour a privileged few – immigrants and politicians. And in such a narrative, the only parliamentary political alternative appeared to be the Swedish Democrats, who in the eyes of the group had not been involved in the social changes that Sweden had gone through, and who in their rhetoric managed to capture and coin on this common experience.

While the testimonies themselves were fairly neutral in describing concrete events, commentators treated the testimonies as signs of a bigger issue. In the comment section the testimonies served as building blocks for the construction of a wider problem. However, as soon as a consensus around the problem had been established, the comment section also served as a space for the formulation of solu-

42 See note 20.

43 See note 20.

44 See note 20.

45 See note 20.

46 See note 20.

tions. Many seemed to think that the only way to rectify the problems described was that the Swedes stood up and took their own responsibility to restore law and order. In the group, notions flourished that “for many years the state has led us to believe that society will solve everything” and that Swedes, therefore had grown “completely paralysed”.<sup>47</sup>

Here, a number of possible solutions appeared. “Someone must be held accountable for this dismantling of Sweden”, a woman wrote. Another man suggested that the government should be “put up against the wall”.<sup>48</sup> “Kick out the pack with immediate effect,” another commented.<sup>49</sup> Others took the opportunity to remind the group members to “vote right and stop whining” in the soon to come election. “A whole new government can appoint new judges and demand that they comply with the legislation without cotton gloves”, a woman suggested.<sup>50</sup> “We must prioritize the Swedish people in the first place! The EU costs us a lot of money, time to leave !!! so we can get law and order in this country again. Vote right this time in the upcoming election!!!”, a woman exclaimed.<sup>51</sup> ‘Right’, in this context, was synonymous with the Sweden Democrats, who were seen as the only political actor who had the will and the ability to act and deal with the perceived problem: “VOTE FOR SD THERE IS NO OTHER PARTY FOR US SWEDES” was one among many slogans.<sup>52</sup>

## A therapeutic form of narration

It is obvious that the testimonies must be understood in relation to the comments they attracted. It was in the connection between original testimonies and the comment section that the subnarratives of social decay were constructed and incorporated into the mythological metanarrative of a systemic collapse.

The different subnarratives were based on a number of clearly distinguishable elements. However, due to the organic structure of the comment sections, these were not always arranged chronologically. Nevertheless, they could be arranged as follows: Testimony → reaction → problem description → solution. In all three examples, the original posters accounted for their traumatic experiences and their reaction towards them, but it was primarily in the comments section that explanations for ideas for why and how best to deal with the problems emerged.

If we treat narratives as socially symbolic acts – that is, as interventions that serve a socially therapeutic function by allowing people to symbolically process and resolve problematic experiences – the structure and form of each thematic subnarrative could be understood as a step-by-step illustration of a therapeutic

47 See note 20.

48 See note 20.

49 See note 20.

50 See note 20.

51 [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=Vilket%20j%C3%A4vla%20skitsam-h%C3%A4lle%20man%20lever%20i&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=Vilket%20j%C3%A4vla%20skitsam-h%C3%A4lle%20man%20lever%20i&epa=SEARCH_BOX), 3. 1. 2020.

52 [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=Vilket%20j%C3%A4vla%20skitsam-h%C3%A4lle%20man%20lever%20i&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=Vilket%20j%C3%A4vla%20skitsam-h%C3%A4lle%20man%20lever%20i&epa=SEARCH_BOX), 3. 1. 2020.

process. It shows how the stories help people to collectively turn trauma and to funnel diffuse feelings of shame, despair and frustration into object-oriented emotions and clear-cut horizons of action, such as anger and a strong drive to hold the ‘responsible’ to account. We can see how the original experiences presented in the testimonies gradually were processed and organised into a comprehensible whole that empowered and prescribed possible actions in order to resolve the situation that had allegedly caused the original experience.

## A polarized content

Since the narratives claimed to say something about social experience, we should not stop at describing the form of cultural fragments and their possible psychological, or even ideological, motives. The task is, in the words of anthropologist Eric R. Wolf, also to seek social explanations for such experiences.<sup>53</sup> Such an explanation demands further empirical research. However, there are suggestions of how the experiences could be made comprehensible. What we can see in the stories shared within the group is that the criticism of the perceived social decay was directed in two directions: partially against the people who were perceived to be intruding on and competing for society’s limited resources – the immigrants – and partly against the decision makers who “let them in” and thus were considered responsible for the current situation.

In an attempt to explain the emergence of new social contradictions where ‘ordinary people’, increasingly pays attention to cultural differences among themselves, while they at the same time disdain the ‘elite’ who in policy and rhetoric is increasingly perceived as alien to their reality, anthropologist Jonathan Friedman has called this phenomenon a “double polarization”. The concept signifies a tendency that Friedman argues has occurred in parallel with a globalised neo-liberalization of national politics since the 1970s. According to sociologist Göran Therborn, this has implied a “counter-reformation” in which many social reforms around which the Swedish welfare state was built have been gradually reversed.<sup>54</sup> As the urban, political and economic ‘elite’ in this process has climbed upward and become increasingly cosmopolitan and liberally minded, those who have not adapted quickly enough or benefited from the new order have experienced a downward social pressure where they more or less have been forced to defend what they have, and to fight for security and stability by competing for scarce resources (jobs, housing, welfare, etc.) on cultural grounds.<sup>55</sup>

53 Wolf, Eric R.: Facing Power. Old Insights, New Questions. In: *American Anthropologist* 92/3 (1990), p. 594.

54 Therborn, Göran: *Kapitalet, överheten och alla vi andra. Klassamhället i Sverige – det rådande och det kommande*. Lund 2018, p. 43.

55 Friedman, Jonathan: Globalization, Dis-Integration, Re-organization. *The Transformations of Violence*. In: id. (ed.): *Globalization, the State, and Violence*. Walnut Creek, CA 2003, p. 1–33.

The problem, however, is not just that society is pulled apart, but that the elites are unable to understand and unwilling to acknowledge the social reality experienced by the ‘losers’. Instead, the Swedish public debate is characterized by a form of official “value rhetoric” in which values such as tolerance, respect for others, freedom of choice and openness for diversity have become hegemonic. Some argue that the debate has been conceptually limited by how a programmatically post-national left and a cosmopolitan-minded bourgeoisie meet in their mutual affirmation of immigration and diversity.<sup>56</sup> For this reason, there is no room in the public debate for the experiences around which those negatively affected by globalisation and neoliberal politics arrange their picture of reality, causing a distrust of the voices heard in the public debate such as politicians and journalists on established media platforms.

### The forgotten economy of neo-nationalism

It is obvious how the myth of a systemic collapse, does not merely express a racist worldview. Above, we can see that all narratives were based on one common foundation of experience. There is an apparent distrust in the police’s ability to prevent and solve crimes, a despair about the lack of healthcare resources and the fear of a pension system that generates anything but security. All in all, the one recurring theme visible in all narratives was the disappointment in a welfare state that is no longer able to deliver to the degree that people have learned to expect from it. Some commentators even admitted that they had previously voted for the Social Democrats – “a party that once took care of the elderly but which has betrayed all the ideals they once stood for”.<sup>57</sup>

The loss of trust originated from the disappointment of unfulfilled promises. A woman wrote: “Well, Sweden has come a long way apart from the people’s home, where a lot of things worked well. Now it is all going downhill without any stop in sight”.<sup>58</sup> Another commented: “I want to vote for a party that cares about the old, handicapped and those with special needs, etc. But it seems like there is no party that cares, unless they are not a racist party at the same time. Because, as for now, all that our ancestors and parents struggled for are about to disappear. Good schools, good health care, the pensions and above all good elderly care.”<sup>59</sup>

Anger and outrage seemed to emanate from an ongoing socio-economic process in which austerity in the public sector had been turned to doctrine at the same time as the development of wages had seemingly stagnated. One man explained that Sweden “is a sick society where wages have been frozen for thirty years. At the same time, everything has become at least ten times more expensive.” He fur-

56 Trägårdh, Lars: *Den svala svenska tilliten. Förutsättningar och utmaningar*. Stockholm 2013, p. 187.

57 [www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=DEN%20FATTIGE%20PENSION%C3%84REN!&epa=SEARCH\\_BOX](https://www.facebook.com/groups/279528999133185/search/?query=DEN%20FATTIGE%20PENSION%C3%84REN!&epa=SEARCH_BOX), 3. 1. 2020.

58 See note 57.

59 See note 57.



ther argued that Sweden had become a society where “working people who have a job still struggle to manage their costs”.<sup>60</sup> In this way, the stories illustrated how changes in the economy had markedly deteriorated people’s living conditions. The basic argument in this discussion seemed to be that “a society that cannot take care of its children, the elderly and the sick is not a good society”.<sup>61</sup> The dissatisfaction and anger directed at immigrants and politicians was clearly grounded in the experience that “Swedish welfare has turned to shit”.<sup>62</sup>

While it is obvious that the metanarrative of a systemic collapse incorporated clearly xenophobic and racist elements, it would be problematic to reduce the group’s activity to a matter of racist ideology alone. Indeed, there are strong arguments that the racism and ethnification of social problems that take place in our time are linked to ongoing economic processes. On such a note, there is a vast amount of research explaining the structural outlines of the economical dimension to what is shared within the group. One recurring line of thought is that the older “Fordist” industrial capitalism, since the seventies has been replaced by an era of far-reaching liberalization and policies aimed at facilitating free movement of capital that had previously been tied to national markets. The previous, relatively stable Fordism, around which the welfare societies of the 20th century had been organized, has been replaced by a more flexible, decentralised and financialised “post-Fordist” regime of accumulation where capital is no longer tied down to large national and local industries, but floating in a global and speculative financial market.<sup>63</sup>

In global competition, the negotiating power of the Swedish labour movement has been weakened. Furthermore, a globalized financial market has severely restricted the state’s ability to exert influence over interest rates and the national economy, especially since the Swedish Riksbank has been exempted from political influence. This means that the national economy has become more exposed to market fluctuations.<sup>64</sup> In addition, as the European Central Bank has the fighting of inflation as one of its main goals, the scope for reforms and investments in the national welfare systems has been limited. The Swedish Social Democracy has for the same reason turned politically to the right. This has meant that economic policy has increasingly come to focus on what reforms can be made within the framework allowed by the market, enforcing a politics of austerity which has been beneficial to a few and unfavourable to the many as welfare services have been withdrawn or down-prioritised. Indeed, Swedish real wages have been stagnant while corporate profit margins have increased. The inequality between Swedish capital owners and wage earners has in fact increased at the fastest rate of all OECD countries.<sup>65</sup> The gaps are now back to the same levels as during the early

60 See note 57.

61 See note 57.

62 See note 57.

63 Harvey, David: *The Condition of Postmodernity. An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Oxford 1990.

64 Bellamy Foster, John: *The Financialization of Capitalism*. In: *Monthly Review* 58/11 (2007).

65 OECD (ed.): *Society at a Glance – OECD Social Indicators: Economic Survey of Sweden*. 2017.

1900s, which in Sweden was a period of recurring strikes and social unrest.<sup>66</sup> At the same time, the labour movement has largely retreated and turned inward with the aim of helping its members to compete in the labour market rather than taking collective action against a fundamentally flawed economic system. All in all, we can see how the content of politics has come to follow Angela Merkel's vision of a "market-conforming democracy".<sup>67</sup>

Margaret Thatcher's frequently repeated mantra "There is no alternative" has thus been turned into official truth.<sup>68</sup> Capitalism has seemingly out-competed all possible alternatives. Current times have therefore been described as a "post-political" era in which the content of politics has been narrowed down to dealing with logistical and technical issues of how to cater to the needs of the market.<sup>69</sup> We're now living in a form of "capitalist realism" where the prevailing economic forms have been naturalized.<sup>70</sup> And in such a political climate, the root problem in society cannot be conceived of as inherent to the economic system itself. It has to be found elsewhere. Herein lies a clue to understanding how 'the Swedes' have come to play an increasingly important role in the political debate. The sociologist Vivek Chibber, for example, has suggested that the disappearance of any substantial critique of capitalism has entailed an increased preoccupation with cultural difference, as the only available way to motivate or question perceived economic injustices.<sup>71</sup>

The famous historian Eric J. Hobsbawm's perhaps most well-known thesis on nationalism is that it is generally constructed and mobilised from above, as a way of legitimising the interests of national elites.<sup>72</sup> However, in order to survive, the ideas must be rooted in concrete needs and experiences among the broader population. What we can see in groups like *Stand up for Sweden*, however, is how nationalism is primarily cherished by those who find themselves left behind. Nationalism seems to derive power from below. Friedman and Ekholm-Friedman suggest that this kind of neo-nationalist populism instead is based on polarizations between the reality experienced 'in the street', and the official discourse championed by the political and cultural elite.<sup>73</sup>

One way to understand this is to look at how the interests of economic, political and cultural elites have changed in relation to where the capital markets are

66 Therborn, Göran: *Kapitalet, överheten och alla vi andra. Klassamhället i Sverige – det rådande och det kommande*. Lund 2018, p. 97.

67 Streeck, Wolfgang: *How Will Capitalism End?* London 2016, p. 56.

68 Harvey, David: *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford 2005, p. 40.

69 Mouffe, Chantal: *The End of Politics and the Challenge of Right Wing Populism*. In: Francisco Panizza (ed.): *Populism and the Mirror of Democracy*. London 2005, p. 50–71.

70 Fisher, Mark: *Capitalist Realism. Is There No Alternative?* Winchester 2009.

71 Chibber, Vivek: *Rescuing Class From the Cultural Turn*. In: *Catalyst* 1/1 (2017).

72 Hobsbawm, Eric J.: *Nations and Nationalism since 1780. Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Cambridge 1995 (1992).

73 Friedman, Jonathan; Ekholm Friedman, Kajsa: *Sverige. Från nationalstat till pluralt samhälle*. In: *Bortom stereotyperna? Invandrare och integration i Danmark och Sverige*. Göteborg 2006 (Centrum för Danmarksstudier, vol. 12).

located.<sup>74</sup> While these once stood as representatives of the “interests of the nation”, they now advocate mobility, diversity and integration into the EU and the world market. Those who, on the other hand, have seen themselves disadvantaged by such a development, have in the lack of a language to understand society’s economic transformations found cultural explanatory models relying on ‘the people’ and ‘the nation’. They are mourning an imagined community located in the past, where the nation still stood as a guarantor of the common interests and welfare of the people. For these, the winners of the ongoing development appear as an elite who silence alternative voices.

*Stand up for Sweden* becomes a channel for these problematic experiences. Since no systemic critique of the political economy is available, the preoccupation with the nation, the Swedes and ‘the others’ become a way to take a stance in an exposed socio-economic situation. It allows those who see themselves as losers in the neoliberal globalization of the economy to form a ‘tactical’ alliance to resolve a common experience. The powerful impact of the testimonies shared within the group relies on the claim of giving a true, undistorted picture of reality and that those who read them recognise themselves in the testimonies. Processed through the group’s established mythology, the posts by ‘ordinary people’ become counterpoints to established news media outlets who, according to the group members, only reproduce ‘politically correct’ images of the world, covering up news and facts that do not confirm to the cosmopolitan elite’s ideal of Sweden as a functioning multicultural society. The testimonies become ‘alternative facts’, considered to illuminate aspects of existence that the traditional media outlets refuse to acknowledge.

74 Robinson, I. William: Global Capitalism Theory and the Emergence of Transnational Elites. In: *Critical Sociology* 38/3 (2011), p. 349–363.