

# The Myth of the Multicultural Society

Immigrant Mobilization contesting the Swedishness of Structures

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## **Introduction**

EU Anti-discrimination directives have provided immigrants and ethnic minorities<sup>1</sup> with a powerful tool to influence national policy-making. Many ethnic organizations, NGOs and governmental anti-discrimination actors argue that the new EU legislation within this area has been crucial for the opportunities to actively fight discrimination in Sweden. During the last years, a national network of Anti-discrimination bureaus, as well as a Center Against Racism embracing more than a hundred ethnic organizations and NGOs, have been established in Sweden to protect immigrants' rights and to work actively against racism and discrimination. At the same time, current research argues that ethnic organizations are being discriminated against by the governmental integration requirements, and unemployed academics with immigrant background change their foreign-sounding names to typically Swedish counterparts or go on hunger strikes against labor market discrimination. Several ethnic minority and immigrant associations claim that their political voice is being silenced. Furthermore, there is consensus among anti-discrimination lawyers and NGO actors that the new EU legislation, although successfully implemented in national law, is hard to put in practice by actually sentencing for instance employers or nightclub owners who discriminate against immigrants and ethnic minorities.

In this context, it is highly relevant to look closer at the interplay between immigrant and anti-racism actors on the one hand, and political opportunity structures on the other. A main assumption is that such structures not only include formal political opportunity, as democratic rights and laws against ethnic discrimination, but also subtle nuances of identification and rejection, division between "us and the Others", and the recognition or denial of the multicultural society. Whether the implementation of anti-discrimination agendas succeeds or not might finally depend on these informal opportunity structures. Current research on immigrants' political mobilization focuses largely on diasporas and

transnational communities. The emphasis of my study is political mobilization within a national context – although using trans- and supranational arenas for claims-making – where ethnic minority and immigrant groups, together with anti-racist NGOs, seek equal opportunities and the receiving society's recognition of its multiculturalism.

Parekh distinguishes between multiculturalist and monoculturalist multicultural societies. The former responds to cultural diversity by cherishing it and making it central to its self-identity, while the latter seeks to assimilate minority cultures into the mainstream majority culture (Parekh, 2000). By the concept “multicultural society” I refer to a pluralistic, inclusive society, with enough openness to embrace a diversity of ethnic identities, and where the individuals' opportunities are not related to ethnicity. This is perhaps a utopian vision, but my ambition with such a definition is to adopt a critical position towards the habitual use of the concept, referring rather to a high proportion of citizens with immigrant background than an acceptance of difference and open societal structures.

### **Purpose and methods**

To investigate within which informal structural contexts organizations defending immigrants' and ethnic minorities' rights mobilize, which is the main aim of this paper, I have performed semi-structured deep interviews with 14 members of ethnic organizations, anti-racism NGOs, and governmental integration and anti-discrimination offices. I have also used relevant documents as public reports and scholarly investigations on conditions for support of voluntary organizations, reports on the legal treatment of discrimination cases taken to court, ethnic organizations' annual reports, newspaper articles and statistical registers. When I started the research, I had not yet clearly defined the research question. My objective was to approximate myself to the grounded theory tradition, where the theoretical assumptions take shape from the empirical data. Based on former research and existing theory on immigrant

mobilization, citizenship<sup>2</sup> and multiculturalism, I aimed at exploring the issue of political mobilization among immigrant and ethnic minority groups in Sweden, and the structures within which they act, with as little previous assumptions as possible. I believed that this was the best way to keep my mind open to the empirical findings. Throughout the interviews and the subsequent data analysis<sup>3</sup>, a pattern of informal power structures and subtle discrimination started to appear, which was further strengthened by several public and scholarly investigations that I included in the documentation, and led me to formulate the main thesis of this paper.

### **Multiculturalism in the current theoretical debate**

Currently, multiculturalism is a central issue within the political theory debate. Classical liberal ideals of equal treatment are being challenged by claims for special rights based on cultural identity and ethnicity, as affirmative action, or exemptions from national law regarding halal slaughter and Sikh police officers wearing a turban. At the core of the multiculturalist approach is the claim that politics based on “universal” human rights and liberalism in fact are shaped by a Western, Christian culture, with its roots in colonialism and oppression of other cultures, which often have been considered inferior. With multicultural politics, oppressed minorities could gain recognition, respect and a larger extent of cultural autonomy. The opinions regarding how much freedom should be given to cultural practices that collide with liberal individual rights vary. In his practically classic work “Multicultural Citizenship”, Kymlicka opines that only minority rights which encourage individual liberty should be promoted (Kymlicka 1995). He also argues for the right to autonomy for particularly national minorities. Kymlicka has been criticized for making significant distinctions between the rights he believes should be granted to recognized national minorities compared to immigrants, considering the latter group’s basis for claims-making clearly

inferior. He also fails to deepen the discussion of how to create mutual understanding and societal cohesion with respect of cultural and ethnic difference. Kymlicka rather sees different cultures as isolated enclaves, in the ideal case peacefully living side by side and participating in some political contexts, but rarely mixing. Parekh means that mutual understanding should be searched through inter-cultural dialogues. Defenders of cultural practices that others believe violate human rights should be given the right to argue for their beliefs, and the opposite side should not be allowed to do more than try to influence them through counter-arguments (Parekh 2000).

Common for these scholars is the strong emphasis on cultural belonging as a fundamental part of the individual's identity, and the importance of granting minorities special rights to compensate for the inequality between ethnic majorities and minorities, an inequality that has been neglected by advocates for traditional liberal ideals of equal treatment. Parekh defends the opposition against collective rights as undermining the individual's rights within a cultural community, by claiming that a member of a cultural community actually could reach a stronger position as his ethnic group achieves special rights to increase their representation and voice in society (Parekh 2000).

For Benhabib, multiculturalism is a natural and inevitable part of globalization. A rich cultural debate and reformulations of the constantly changing "we" are necessary components to overcome the challenges for democratic, liberal states that the new world order poses regarding their civil liberties, political rights and representative institutions (Benhabib 2002). Nationalists and fundamentalists, rejecting the multicultural global civilization, are from this view most likely to react against increased cultural mixture and hybridization, by forming what Castells defined as *resistance identities* (Castells 1996).

The perhaps most well known critique of the multiculturalist approach is represented by

Barry in his comprehensive work “Culture and equality”, where he claims to be concerned with “the increased emphasis on what divides people at the expense of what unites them”. Barry is particularly critical towards the views that support the politization of ethnic or cultural identities, as opposed to political identities formed around a common situation or interest, for instance the labor movement. Such “anti-universalism” risks to provide xenophobes and ethno centrists with arguments and prepare the way for ethnic conflicts, Barry argues (Barry, 2001).

Stevenson underlines the need to reformulate the content of nation-state citizenship in a context where both “globalism and localism” redefines personal identity and individuals’ sense of belonging. To reshape national identity and create “a common culture of difference” is one of the main aims of multiculturalism, Stevenson states. The cosmopolitan agenda he proposes could be described as a universalism with space for cultural differences, similar to Parekh’s pluralist universalism, based on the assumption that all ethnicities in a multicultural society ought to participate in creating an inclusive atmosphere with space for cultural differences, but also the recognition that a certain level of universalism is necessary for societal cohesion, mutual understanding and open dialogue (Parekh, 2000; Stevenson 2003).

Regardless of which approach towards multiculturalism one prefers, it is doubtlessly a fact that Western societies during the last decades have become increasingly ethnically mixed through several waves of immigration and refugees (Soysal, 1994). The central issue for scholars debating multiculturalism is thus which attitude society should adopt towards this reality. Instead of turning multiculturalism into “an oppositional position claiming the immigrants’ right to cultural autonomy”, as frequently has been the case in contemporary debate (Ålund and Schierup, 1991), I chose to promote a multiculturalism defined as immigrants’ and ethnic minorities’ right to participate in creating societal structures that hitherto has been formed and maintained exclusively by the ethnic majority population. This

focus does not imply questioning the right to one's own cultural identity, but it does neither particularly emphasize cultural identification and ethnicity- or culture based rights as the central political issue. Culture *could* be a legitimate basis for political claims-making, but would not necessarily be so, and an individual's political identification might be larger cross-culturally than within his or her native ethnic community, based on, for instance, economic situation, gender or social class. Adopting such a universalistic multicultural perspective could prevent a stigmatizing and simplifying view of political actors with another ethnic background than the majority population as constant representatives of their ethnic group<sup>4</sup>, yet leaving enough space to discuss issues as the feasibility of affirmative action and special representation.<sup>5</sup>

### **Diasporas and immigrant mobilization**

Transnational communities and transnational migrants, virtually embodying globalization through organizing their lives between the homeland and the host country, have a central place in contemporary research on migration. These phenomena are not necessarily analyzed in political terms, but may just as well focus on the transnational lifestyle as a practical, or necessary, solution. That is the case for migrant parents from Third World countries sending significant amounts of money back home to support their children and older relatives, or the increasing number of people living in more than one culture and enjoying dual citizenship (Levitt, 2003; Münz and Ohliger, 2003). The most typical political context for ethnic communities living outside of their homeland is the diaspora<sup>6</sup>, characterized by a strong sense of cultural identification, not seldom as a response to the host society's exclusion and marginalization. Immigrants within a diaspora typically seek to live closely together with their compatriots, maintain strong links with their country of origin, and are often actively involved in the political life of the ethnic homeland (Münz and Ohliger, 2003).

Less former research is to be found on immigrants and ethnic minorities as political actors, focusing their claims-making on the country of residence, the new homeland. Koopmans and Statham argues that a nation state's attitude towards its immigrant population, as well as towards its perception of itself as "multicultural", is crucial for shaping migrant mobilization. According to Koopmans and Statham, a pluralist approach, defined as a country that recognizes multiculturalism, provides incentives for immigrants to form close relationships between the host country and their homeland, and to participate in the cultural sphere and the policy processes in the host country. This approach can be assumed to stimulate transnational as well as national mobilization and network building, and has at least formerly been applied by the Netherlands. A contrast to this is the German approach. The strong relationship between citizenship and "Germanness", and the unwillingness to recognize itself as an immigration country, have had consequences such as an exclusion of immigrants from the political sphere, "leaving migrants looking homewards" (Koopmans and Statham, 2003).

Political activity among immigrants and ethnic minorities in Sweden today is largely consensus focused and non-radical. Being recognized as an organization is perceived as crucial for political opportunity, and to participate in formal decision-making processes has traditionally been considered the best way to achieve influence. There is also a common fear that confrontation and radicalization could harm an organization's legitimacy and make the state stop public funding. Currently, an increased national mobilization is taking place among ethnic organizations and anti-racist NGOs in Sweden. Recently, the national Center Against Racism was funded, in the shape of an umbrella NGO embracing over 100 local and national immigrant and anti-racist associations. Initially, there was a political discussion about funding a governmental anti-racism institution, but after massive lobbying from several NGO actors, it was agreed that the center should be an independent entity. The center's main purposes are to

increase the public's knowledge about racism and ethnic discrimination, and to influence the political process through lobbying and active participation. At the same time, a national network of Anti-discrimination bureaus have been funded, with the objective to help people exposed to ethnic discrimination denounce to Sweden's Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination.

Common for both governmental and NGO actors working against racism and discrimination is that they to a large extent use EU Anti-discrimination directives to give leverage for their cause. Contemporary research on recognition struggles underlines the importance of the European level, providing deprived groups with new opportunities for local, national and transnational mobilization (Hobson, 2000). Sweden has traditionally been sensitive to international opinion since it is concerned about its good reputation abroad, which may explain why this has been a rather efficient way to influence national policy-makers. The current trend appears to be that anti-racist NGOs and ethnic organizations focus on the national arena, using the EU directives as a tool to increase formerly weak associations' opportunity to gain political influence. Referring to the current theoretical debate, immigrant and ethnic minority mobilizations in Sweden should thus rather be analyzed in a context of social movements and recognition struggles than one of "homeland" focused diasporas.

Recently, ethnic discrimination has been a hot topic in Swedish mass media, not the least due to startling incidents as hunger strikes among unemployed immigrant academics, or people with immigrant background changing to typically Swedish names to increase their chances of at least being selected for a job interview. The fact that the debate of structural discrimination<sup>7</sup> currently is being brought into the parliamentary sphere<sup>8</sup> could be considered a sign of changing discourses. There is consensus among ethnic organizations and NGO actors that such changes are fundamental, but also that there tend to be a gap between political insights and new legislation on the one hand, and everyday discriminatory practices on the

other. This is something that also Sweden's Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination agrees on, claiming that "many people are discriminated against in Sweden today. People can be denied jobs, housing and loans at banks solely based on their foreign name, looks or religious faith. Decision makers in Sweden have long been in the forefront of the international work on behalf of human rights, but it is apparently much more difficult to take on these problems at a domestic level" (Carson, 2005).

### **Swedishness and immigration**

The well known Swedish model was created in the 1930s, based on historical compromises between capital and labor, and social-democratic hegemony. It may best be described as a successful union of capitalist economy and comprehensive social security, and has been characterized by a thorough social and economic planning of society that often is referred to as "social engineering". Former research argues that the political consensus on welfare politics was greater in Sweden than in any other country, and that the Swedish civil society approved to rather strict control policies and planning of several spheres of life, practically without exceptions. A close relationship and identification with the state was a crucial part of the Swedish model. Swedish people identified with values that characterized the national project: rationality, equality, justice and reason. Being moderate has traditionally been highly valued in Sweden. This is summed up in the Swedish word "lagom"<sup>9</sup>, which often is claimed to explain Swedish mentality well, and to have no international counterparts. Swedes are often described as very preoccupied by what other people might think of them, shy, and afraid to speak without having anything relevant to say. Silence is also a quality that generally is highly valued among Swedes, and people who for instance speak out loud, or gesticulate intensively, may in many social contexts be considered odd and annoying (Daun, 1989).

Progressive Swedish politics, where the high level of equality between men and women often serves as an international example<sup>10</sup>, are based on rational arguments as what is best for the children or the equal worth of all human beings. Swedes are generally proud of what they consider a modern and highly developed society based on good values and common sense, and may tend to look down on arguments based on emotions instead of rational reasoning, as on countries and cultures they perceive as less modern. Simultaneously, immigrants have in several investigations claimed that they feel depreciated by their Swedish colleagues and neighbors, since they are considered “too loud and emotional”, or break the informal codes of conduct at the work place cafeteria by failing to follow the deeply rooted Swedish avoidance of conflicts and consensus-seeking in discussions and conversations (Daun 1989; Schierup 1991). This is significant not the least in the political sphere, where people can be excluded by subtle means if they break the rather strict norms of what is considered normal behavior (Edfast Lindberg, 2004). The Swedish welfare state was built upon a strong notion of cultural homogeneity and common values, which has been important for the shaping of Swedish self-identity. There were therefore no obvious preconditions for the formation of an inclusive multicultural society when Sweden started turning into an immigration country in the 1950s and 60s, and a resistance to “non-Swedish behavior” still appears to be common.

Immigration into Sweden at first consisted of labor immigrants from Southern Europe, who came to work in the prosperous industries. Later, immigration primarily continued through several waves of refugees. According to the 2004 census, 1 426 293 persons living in Sweden are immigrants or were born in Sweden by immigrated parents. This represents 15,8% of the Swedish population, and does neither include children of one ethnically Swedish and one immigrated parent, nor grand-children of immigrants (SCB, 2005). During the first decades of immigration, Sweden saw it as a temporary phenomenon – just as other new immigration countries in Europe – and assimilation as the only immigration political strategy.

This changed in the 1970s, when a multicultural immigrant policy was adopted, aiming at the incorporation of immigrants in the welfare model and allowing them to maintain the homeland's culture, for instance by the right to education also in the mother tongue. Many immigrants followed the traditional Swedish way of corporate life by joining new immigrant associations, mainly based on ethnic and national identity. Initially, these associations focused on helping arriving compatriots with practical issues and as cultural communities, but later began to aim at giving the ethnic group a voice in policy-making contexts (Soysal, 1994; Ålund, 1991). Earlier research has however argued that there was a discrepancy between declared multiculturalism and the structuring of immigrant associations from the state, assuming that these were depoliticized by emphasizing "cultural diversity" and "ethnicity" instead of political participation and influence (Shierup, 1991). To understand the current situation, it is crucial to be familiar with the importance of associative life in Sweden's history and present. NGOs and voluntary associations have traditionally been closely related to the state, and dependent on public funding. Being officially recognized as an organization gives legitimacy and access to relations with authorities and policy-makers. Today, several ethnic organizations claim that the state tries to silence their political voice, through obliging them to formulate explicit integration aims to receive funding, and through prioritizing organizations that focus on providing communal services.

Since the 1990s, integration<sup>11</sup> has been the main focus for Swedish immigration policies (Aytar, 1999), and the multiculturalist approach has received less attention. Several ethnic organization actors claim that the whole responsibility for integration has been placed on them. In this context, it might be considered symptomatic that ethnic and immigrant associations are referred to as "associations within the integration area" (Statskontoret 2004). One of the practical consequences of the way the state sees the "immigrant community" has, according to the president of SIOS, a large umbrella organization for ethnic associations in

Sweden, been obliging all ethnic and immigrant associations to work against so called honor-related violence, even though this phenomenon does not exist in their own ethnic group. Such violence, which has received much mass media attention in the last years, primarily affect girls with immigrant background trying to adopt a "Swedish lifestyle" and break with patriarchal patterns. It has also been questioned if such violence can be claimed to have primarily cultural explanations, and whether it is not rather an issue of men, mostly with a very low educational level, reacting against social exclusion and humiliation in the new country by desperately trying to recover the status and power they once had. Regardless of the complex explanations that lie behind this phenomenon, the president of SIOS claims that it is absurd to "hold all 'non-Swedes' responsible for honor-related violence" by obliging them to focus their work on the issue, and that this only is another example of how the authorities, due to their lack of knowledge about different ethnicities, simplify things and treat all people with foreign background as one homogeneous group.

The political scientists Bo Bengtsson and Karin Borevi claim that immigrants frequently are being discriminated against within several associations dominated by Swedes, and that integration objectives ought to be required from all associations, not only those representing ethnic minorities (Bengtsson and Borevi 2004). An interviewed official at the Swedish Integration Board states that no official institution, nor the ethnic organizations, alone can solve the integration issue, but that it is the responsibility of the whole society to actively work against discrimination and for increased tolerance. He furthermore believes it to be "typical for Sweden" that the public takes on a passive position, expecting governmental institutions to solve the problems without people having to change anything in their own behavior or personal lives.

## **The invisible exclusion of “the Other”**

In “*The Claims of Culture*”, Benhabib describes a current massive multicultural mobilization, closely related to globalization, which fundamentally transforms the traditional liberal democratic societies and challenges nation-state citizenship. The pressure on immigrants to “become like the natives” has been significantly weakened, Benhabib argues, claiming that “immigrants need not change their names as they once did upon reaching Ellis Island in New York, nor do their children even need to learn the official language of the receiving country” (Benhabib, 2002). I would like to contest primarily two aspects of Benhabib’s reasoning. Firstly, it may doubtlessly be questioned if a transformation of Western societies from an ethnically homogeneous to an ethnically plural population really means that these societies are being reshaped by multiculturalism and embracing a pluralistic approach. As has been stated above, immigrants in contemporary Sweden actually do change their names in order to avoid ethnic discrimination, which must be considered a backlash for multiculturalism. Secondly, Benhabib discusses immigrants who are able to live in economic and cultural enclaves without even learning the official language, for instance surviving by working in the shadow economies of big cities. This is hardly an adequate argument to define an increasing multiculturalism, supposing that a truly multicultural society should be characterized by equal opportunities regardless of ethnicity, and the participation of all ethnic groups in creating new societal structures. Instead, such a scenario would refer to the creation of an immigrant underclass living in ghettos in unattractive housing areas, something that to a greater or lesser extent already is a problematic fact in many Western societies.

There are many subtle ways by which ethnic minorities and immigrants may be excluded from participating in the established societal sphere on the same premises as ethnic Swedes. For instance, the frequent use of the term “immigrant” is problematic, since there is consensus among ethnic organizations that this is a stigmatizing concept. Claiming the right

to define their own identity, ethnic organization representatives question the fact that Swedish-born children and grand children of immigrants still are marked by this concept. According to them, this is a way for the ethnically Swedish majority to deny cultural diversity by sorting a multitude of ethnicities under the one label of “non-Swedes”. One suggestion made during the interviews is to replace the misleading term “immigrant” by descriptions that represents the actual double cultural identity many of these individuals experience, as “Turk-Swedes” or “Afro-Swedes”. The latter is already being used by the Afro-Swedes national association (Afrosvenskarnas riksförbund). Another important question for the ethnic groups in Sweden is that of minority status<sup>12</sup>. How long, for instance, should an ethnic community live in the country before being granted official minority status?

According to a public report produced by the National Board of Health and Welfare, unemployed immigrants believed to have little possibilities to find a job, and those who were working claimed that they were being treated worse than their Swedish colleagues at the work place, that they were prevented from making a professional career, and that they felt generally depreciated in the professional and public sphere. One explanation to the worsened life conditions for immigrant groups in Sweden since the 1980s is that general cutdowns in the welfare state particularly have affected weaker groups, as ethnic minorities. When immigrants were asked to describe Sweden in more general terms, positive judgments as “democratic” and “no corruption” were made about the Swedish society, while several negative judgments as “coward”, “cold” and “shy” were used to describe the Swedes. To sum up, the Swedish mentality was described as the second most negative thing with immigrating to Sweden, after the general feeling of being lost that the migration brought about. However, most interviewees also stated that the immigration to Sweden had improved their life conditions altogether (SoS 1999).

In former research about immigrants' perceptions on Swedish mentality, several interviewees described the "Swedish master behavior" as something characteristic – Swedes tended according to their perception to always act as if they knew better and had to teach the immigrants how to behave. "There is a nationalistic protectionism in Sweden, everyone believes that Sweden and the Swedes are the best", one interviewee said. Another suggested that hidden racism is common; "the Swedes have learned not to show their prejudice". Many immigrants also mentioned the importance of speaking Swedish without accent to be taken seriously, and the feeling of always being scapegoated if something bad occurred (Daun, 1989).

There is comprehensive research available on the marginalization of immigrants and (particularly housing market related) segregation in Sweden. Shierup claims that ethnic discrimination in Sweden is significant both within the political sphere, the labor market and the housing market. He defines immigrants' participation in the political sphere as an "ethnic tower of Babel", where "multiculturalism" has been constructed from above, without giving immigrants any real voice in society. Such a unilateral and dialogue-unfriendly construction is deemed to collapse, he argues. As I have mentioned earlier, Shierup also claims that immigrant organizations have been "depoliticized" and "ethnized", and thus adapted to general Swedish interests. Several representatives of ethnic minority and immigrant associations that I have interviewed perceive that the authorities tend to see them exclusively as cultural communities or service agencies for the immigrant population, not as political actors. Furthermore, Schierup refers to labor market discrimination in Sweden as "a cultural division of labor", and means that there is a large gap between the general public morality and political correctness promoting multiculturalism, and the actual remaining marginalization and discrimination (Schierup, 1991).

The public report “*Décor or participants?*” (*Dekor eller deltagare?*) focuses on ethnic discrimination within the political sphere. Politically active immigrants are according to the report many times being discriminated against by subtle means, as people exchanging significant looks, or laughing, when somebody breaks the invisible codes by talking too loud or otherwise behaving unconventionally. A more concrete form of discrimination is the tendency to give all important positions within the party to ethnic Swedes, or only allowing immigrants to work with integration issues. Most of the interviewed immigrants in the report see themselves primarily as representatives for their political party, and believe that it is impossible for them to speak for their whole ethnic community, or for immigrants and ethnic minorities in general. Some also claim that integration is the responsibility of the majority society. A typical experience politically active immigrants have is that of “double punishment”; if they want to work with integration issues that is considered wrong, since the perception is that this work should be done by someone who “knows how Swedish society functions”. If they do not want to focus on integration issues, it is also wrong, since the group believes that the immigrants automatically should know more about the issue.

The investigators defined three main types of group situations that politically active immigrants generally encounter. The first one is *the closed group*, where the group seeks to conserve existing structures at any cost, and clearly shows the unwillingness to accept any “different” participants. By ignoring or even openly insulting those who for instance do not speak Swedish perfectly, these groups contribute to structural discrimination, and most likely increases the risk that the immigrant’s first contact with the political life also will be the last one.

The second group type is *the hypocritical group*, which is highly concerned about giving a politically correct and tolerant image. New members are at first warmly welcomed. Shortly, however, it becomes clear that the group has no intentions to promote a more active

participation by immigrant actors, but mainly is interested in gaining political legitimacy by showing that it does not discriminate against ethnic minorities. Many immigrants with experience from this kind of groups claimed to have been bothered and felt inhibited by the Swedish “overprotecting” and patronizing attitude, treating them as if they understood less and needed to be guided. A typical tendency within these groups was to organize “multicultural” activities as culture evenings and dancing events, but limit decision-making exclusively to the ethnically Swedish members.

*The socializing group*, finally, does rarely distinguish between politically inexperienced immigrants or ethnic Swedes. New members are simply not accepted until they have adapted to the group’s norms and procedures, and learned the political work from the ground. For immigrants who arrive to Sweden as adults it is difficult to integrate in such groups, since it takes a long time to adapt to the Swedish political culture. It may also be difficult to go any further, since the political career in Sweden normally starts in the youth associations at an early age. The socializing group emphasizes the importance of strictly following predefined patterns for political meetings, which for instance includes the “unofficial rule” that new members should be silent and listen to the others. This might be particularly difficult for immigrants with experience from different political cultures.

The report clearly states that political activity among immigrants is being prevented by structural obstacles. It however also concludes that visible and invisible codes eventually tend to be broken, and that the political engagement among many immigrants brings hope of a positive development. According to the investigators, the political sphere and society as a whole would gain from the creation of *equal groups*, where no invisible structures are used to exclude people, or try to shape diversity into homogeneousness. In the equal group, there would be a genuine interest of representing the multicultural country that Sweden now is. The day such equal groups become reality, there would be great possibilities to develop political

structures that allow and encourage everyone to participate, the investigators claim (Edfast Ljungberg, 2004).

Attempts to define a “national character” or “public identity” are by nature simplifying and may be highly questioned. Yet, they generally neither completely lack of relevance. The Swedish ethnologist Åke Daun has dedicated much of his academic career to trying to capture “Swedishness”, and the section above defining typical Swedish characteristics, also from the immigrants’ point of view, is largely based on his research. Several of the persons with immigrant background that I have interviewed refer to this Swedishness when trying to explain difficulties they have experienced in the contacts with the majority society. One of the interviewed immigrants is a woman of Finnish origin who has lived 40 years in Sweden. She has felt discriminated against in her professional life during all this time, although she comes from a country with a culture similar to the Swedish, where people look and dress the same way as in Sweden. She expresses this experience by claiming that it is hard to get any decision-taking positions if you are not ethnically Swedish: “People feel threatened if they think that you could achieve power. There is a ‘Swedishness’ that is hard to explain, and that makes you feel that you are not a part of it.” She means that she never could be seen as Swedish, and that Swedishness is the key to genuine acceptance and, thus, access to established societal structures. Other interviewees take this discussion one step further and state that their goal is not to “become Swedish”, but to change the structures themselves. Only then can multiculturalism be achieved. There is consensus that increased immigrant representation within societal power structures should be the best way to accomplish such change.

Some of the interviewees are hopeful regarding the younger generations, which they believe are more open-minded. They have grown up in a multicultural society, and are used to traveling and meeting people from other cultures. Others however claim that there is a

widespread resistance to the multicultural society among common Swedes. One of the interviewed immigrants puts it this way: “Sweden was more open to immigrants before, but it has become more difficult lately. There are so many immigrant groups here now, and many cultures that are very different from the Swedish. It might be harder for Swedes to accept this. It is important to work to influence people’s attitudes at an early stage, with an emphasis on the school.”

### **Structural discrimination and affirmative action**

Racism and discrimination has in Sweden traditionally been considered an individual, not a structural, problem. Stereotypical images of violent neo-nazis have come to represent racism, something that the “good” majority society rejects. According to the defenders of an analysis that problematizes the majority society’s role in maintaining discriminatory practices and recognizes structural discrimination, the deeply rooted perception of Sweden as an international example of justice and equality paradoxically counteracts the anti-discrimination work. There seems to have been little openness to self-criticism. It has therefore been convenient to focus on the immigrants’ role, and consider the immigrants themselves as mainly responsible for their integration into the Swedish society (Lappalainen 2004; Sawyer 2004).

In a recent report, Lappalainen compares how laws against gender discrimination and laws against ethnic discrimination have been treated in Sweden. He states that the Swedish attitude towards gender discrimination has been very different from that towards ethnic discrimination. For instance, the first Swedish law for equality between men and women was established in 1980, while there was no law providing a comparable protection against ethnic discrimination on the labor market until 1999. Furthermore, it is currently obligatory for both private companies and public work places to adopt a gender equality plan, but there is no

corresponding demand to adopt an “ethnic equality plan”. Lappalainen’s analysis leads him to new questions instead of answers. Have “white” women been favored by a subordination of the ethnic perspective? Was it easier for those in power to accept women’s demands for an effective legislation, since the idea of problems with “ethnic inequality” did not fit into the image of Sweden? He claims that it is necessary to adopt an analytical perspective on discrimination and racism that recognizes ethnic discrimination as a part of remaining power structures, and means that there has been and still is a general lack of interest for and knowledge of these issues among Swedish scholars and researchers. Lappalainen furthermore claims that there has been a lack of problematizing so called racialized privileges in Sweden, i.e., that ethnic Swedes are born into a superior position in relation to immigrants and ethnic minorities. He refers to a research field often called *Critical Whiteness Studies*, which focuses on racial privileges and the reproduction of ethnic power structures, and has developed primarily in the United States. In Sweden, Lappalainen argues, we have often focused on immigrants’ lack of power and resources, but rarely on the mechanisms determining the *access* to power and resources. He underlines the necessity of research that focuses on “the integration of ‘Swedes’ into a multi-ethnic society”, as opposed to the large amount of integration research on the integration of immigrants into the Swedish society (Lappalainen, 2004).

Currently, affirmative action is a topic for debate and many times confrontation, not the least after a case where the well-reputed Uppsala university’s suggestion to reserve 10 percent of the places in the educational programmes for applicants with immigrant background was taken to court. The university lost, which probably was expected – the tradition of equal treatment is strong in Sweden, and many consider affirmative action as colliding with fundamental principles of justice. On the other hand, voices are being raised in favor of affirmative action, for instance at Sweden’s Ombudsman against Ethnic

Discrimination. One argument for the acceptance of affirmative action is recognizing that people de facto have different opportunities in society depending on their ethnic origin, i. e. that structural discrimination exists. Advocates for affirmative action criticize the traditional idea of “colorblindness”, which assumes that the state and its institutions are neutral entities that treat all citizens alike. Furthermore, they usually claim that concepts as “reverse racism” or “reverse discrimination” are irrelevant, since racism and discrimination necessarily are related to positions in a privilege structure. Several authors claim that accusations of reverse racism isolate racism to individual events, and defend the majority population’s privileges by adopting an apparently anti-racist and “colorblind” position. Race and ethnicity would thus only matter to those claiming special rights based on such premises, directing attention from remaining structural inequalities (Omi, 1994; Sawyer, 2004).

### **Anti-discrimination work – the discrepancy between theory and practice**

The interviewed ethnic organization, anti-racist NGOs and institutional anti-discrimination representatives all claim that the EU Anti-discrimination directives have been crucial for the development of Swedish anti-discrimination laws. Several actors mean that there is a genuine interest for anti-racism and anti-discrimination work at the European level, and that the European Commission many times is more responsive and easier to gain access to than the Swedish government. There is consensus among the interviewees that the gap between EU legislation and the practical implementation of this in Sweden is large. Adapting national laws to EU directives has not been problematic in itself, according to the Swedish Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination. On the contrary, Swedish legislation was receptive to these changes. But as long as the knowledge of these laws among employers, and – according to several actors – the political will to implement them, is relatively low, and there is no established case law, they remain rather weak. So far, 8 cases of ethnic

discrimination have been taken to labor court, which represents less than 1% of the denouncements, and only one case has been won. A central reason for this is that ethnic discrimination is very difficult to prove. The Swedish Ombudsman against Ethnic Discrimination therefore advocates for stricter laws and sanctions against those who are sentenced for discriminating against. Another issue, pointed out by the Anti-discrimination bureaus, is that only 5% of the people who believe that they have been exposed to ethnic discrimination chooses to denounce this. A large part of the Anti-discrimination bureaus' work therefore consists of informing ethnic minorities about their legal rights and current anti-discrimination laws.

There is consensus among the interviewees that anti-discrimination laws are necessary, but that they alone will not solve the problems with ethnic discrimination. Ultimately, the majority population's attitudes and everyday practices will play a crucial role in deciding whether Sweden recognizes or rejects multiculturalism. Changing people's attitudes, "educating the public" as some interviewees put it, is doubtlessly a long-term project that requires much patience, as well as massive support from mass media<sup>13</sup> and the political elites. Optimism and strong engagement are necessary characteristics for activists working against racism and discrimination, and most interviewees are consequently best to be described as genuine enthusiasts. Some of them, however, describe a growing despair or passivity among the large groups of politically inactive immigrants, or the tendency that these people become attracted by more radical or fundamentalist groups, since they perceive that nothing is done to improve their situation.

## **Conclusion**

Sweden has doubtlessly become a multicultural society, if we by this refer to a certain proportion of the population with foreign roots, languages spoken or international cuisine

available at local restaurants. Elite structures, however, remain almost exclusively Swedish. Both governmental and NGO actors recognize that there is a large gap between anti-discrimination laws and discriminatory practices. There is also consensus that the major part of ethnic discrimination takes place on the labor market, which is considered a crucial arena for achieving integration. Discrimination is generally subtle, and difficult to reach with current laws, according to the interviewed anti-discrimination lawyers.

So far, I have described the national character of my country, the so called Swedishness, in rather negative terms. As I have mentioned earlier, at all trying to define a national character is bound to be simplifying indeed. Swedes are naturally just as complex as all other human beings, and a far from homogeneous group in themselves; open-minded or intolerant, envious or generous, passionate or inhibited... Yet, according to several immigrants' experience, this Swedishness represents an obstacle for their integration into society – a society whose structures already are defined by the majority, and leaves ethnic minorities with no other choices than to adapt to these structures or reinforce their exclusion.

What is it with the Swedes that makes them seem so unwilling to recognize multiculturalism? In a worst-case scenario, the answer to that would be simple xenophobia, a wide-spread belief that Swedes are superior to other people, or at least better of without cultural pluralism. A slightly more positive interpretation would explain protectionism by a general grief at the dismantling of the welfare state, a fear of what shall come, and the emptiness many Swedes might feel when they no longer recognize the country they grew up in, which shaped their self-identity and perceptions of right and wrong. The increasing cultural diversity simply seems confusing, and everyday Swedes prefer colleagues and neighbors who look and talk more or less as themselves, not because they have anything particular against other ethnicities, but simply because it seems easier to chat over lunch with someone who is likely to think the same way they do. It should not be considered surprising if

Swedes, who through generations have been spared from war and suffering, living in a secure and prosperous society where most people have little serious to worry about, see many changes as deteriorations.

What are then the hopes of achieving a massive change of mind among the Swedish civil society, and make people accept and embrace multiculturalism? Recognition is usually the first step towards change, and crucial aspects as structural discrimination and the majority society's role in integration are increasingly being brought into the debate. Some of the interviewees mention the younger generation as more open-minded to other cultures than older generations. This is probably true – the country a 20 year old Swedish girl grew up in is significantly different from what it was when her parents was her age. It is however important not to exaggerate the belief that this automatically will lead to increasing tolerance. Physical segregation in Sweden is striking, and many children of immigrants grow up in unattractive housing areas without practically any contact with ethnic Swedes. Gang formation and honor-related violence are popular topics in sensationalist mass media, which may lead to increasing prejudice and a distortion of the public debate where little or no attention is given to the underlying problems, as discrimination and deep inequalities of opportunity. It is my conviction that a multicultural society cannot function if different ethnicities live physically isolated from each other and in practice have strictly defined, although invisible, positions in the societal power hierarchy. Mass media should take its responsibility for encouraging a positive development much more seriously than what is currently the case.

The immigrants and ethnic minorities themselves are doubtlessly important as political actors in a multiculturalizing process, and to increase immigrant representation in both the political parties, large organizations and company managements is crucial. A multicultural society cannot be fairly represented if ethnic minorities are absent at power positions. There is consensus among the interviewees about this. However, there is also a unanimously negative

attitude towards mobilization based on culture or ethnicity. In opposition to the thesis represented by multiculturalist scholars as Kymlicka or Parekh, immigrant and ethnic minority activists in Sweden wish to be seen as representatives of an ideology – which naturally embraces multiculturalism – and not an ethnicity, nor an “immigrant identity”. They strongly reject ideas as forming an “immigrant party”, which formerly has been mentioned in the debate, and primarily seeks to progressively change discriminatory structures through consensus seeking and dialogue with the majority population.

If we are not to abandon the idea of societal cohesion, seeking to create unity out of diversity seems to be the wisest option. An exaggerated “culturalization” of politics risks to create fragmentation and direct attention from the most crucial issues, actually playing in the hands of the strongest and most privileged groups in society. The right to maintain one’s cultural identity would in a truly multicultural society be a matter of course. Then, less energy would hopefully be spent discussing whether shop assistants should be allowed to wear a veil or not, and focus could instead be directed towards structural inequality, ghettoization and limited access to power contexts. Paradoxical though it may seem, a welfare state based on equality principles might just as well be the most adequate base for the creation of such an inclusive, multicultural society. Deprivileged groups, be it women, low-income earners or ethnic minorities, ought to be those who have most to gain from welfare politics. The welfare society of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has been based on cultural homogeneity. That of the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>14</sup> would have to be culturally pluralistic, built from below by a strong civil society, which is proud of its multiculturalism and based on a “common culture of difference”, uniting different cultures and ethnicities through the support for a society built on principles of tolerance and solidarity.

To conclude, Sweden may be defined as a country with a multicultural population, but homogeneous, ethnically Swedish power structures shape political opportunities. Integration

has mainly been considered the responsibility of the immigrants themselves, and there has been a lack of focusing on the ethnic majority's role in this process. We may assume that there is a widespread unwillingness to recognize multiculturalism, that rather than open racism takes the shape of a simple preference of employees – or neighbors – given the name of Anders to those originally named Muhammed. In such a scenario, immigrants achieving political influence may be expected to be considered threatening. The traditional image of the immigrant as a political actor, within a homeland focused diaspora, is probably easier to accept, since it does not challenge national power structures. Claiming that Sweden is a multicultural society, but rejecting multicultural structures, means neglecting the fact that the majority population also needs to participate in creating something that irreversibly is located beyond the somehow nostalgic perception of Swedishness. A genuine acceptance of the multicultural society could prepare the way for a more universalistic, cross-cultural approach, where a political actor with immigrant origin is not necessarily seen primarily as a representative of his or her own ethnic community. When the individuals' opportunities in society would no longer be related to ethnicity, the multicultural society would no longer be only a myth.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The concepts "immigrant" and "ethnic minority" are problematic, both to use and to define. In Sweden, children and grandchildren of immigrants are often referred to as "second or third generation immigrants". According to Parekh, this is an erroneous definition. The very meaning of the word "immigrant" is that the person has immigrated, why you never can be an "immigrant" in the country where you were born (Parekh 2000). The concept is also by many, not the least the "immigrants" themselves, considered as depreciating. Ethnic minority could be a more fair description of people with another cultural and ethnic background than the majority population, but also implies a recognized minority status that is not granted to all ethnic groups. Since I will not further develop the discussion on which concepts to use in this context, I will refer to both "immigrants" and "ethnic groups" or "ethnic minorities" throughout the article, hoping that this will not seem too confusing for the lector.

<sup>2</sup> When discussing the issues of migration and citizenship, and how the concept of citizenship currently is being redefined and interpreted in several ways, I ought to mention that an important part of this debate regards immigrants who for several reasons do not acquire citizenship in their country of residency. For instance, different forms of "state membership" are being proposed as an alternative to classic nation-state citizenship (Soysal 1994, etc.). In this context, however, considering the limited scope of the paper, I will not enter deeper into this debate, but focus on immigrants and people belonging to ethnic minorities assuming that they participate in society on equal legal grounds as ethnic Swedes.

<sup>3</sup> I have transcribed the interviews and used the program for qualitative data analysis Atlas ti to code and analyze parts of the empirical data.

<sup>4</sup> In such a simplifying view lies the presumption that only ethnic minorities and immigrants have an "ethnic identity", which shapes their opinions and perceptions in all aspects, while the majority population is "culturally neutral". "Immigrant politicians" could thus easily be limited to make claims related to "ethnic issues", and excluded from the general political discourse. This is also the main argument the interviewed immigrant and ethnic minority actors used against political mobilization on ethnic grounds, as the formation of an "Immigrant party", which they almost unanimously believed would be highly stigmatizing.

<sup>5</sup> Arguments for affirmative action and special representation are mainly based on the assumption that all groups in society ought to be represented in policy- and decision making contexts, at work places etc. This does not necessarily mean promoting quotas or other fixed forms of special representation, but at a minimum level requires that the multicultural society should be reflected in political and other power structures.

<sup>6</sup> The concept "diaspora" traditionally referred to the Jewish community, but is nowadays established when describing other minority and immigrant groups living outside of their homeland.

<sup>7</sup> Structural discrimination, as opposed to for instance statistical or quantitative approaches to discrimination which tends to see discrimination as individual and isolated incidents, focuses on the underlying societal structures that influence discriminatory practices, and problematizes the majority population's role. This approach does not only consider de facto discrimination, but also the mechanisms behind it. A central assumption for those referring to structural discrimination is that not only individuals discriminate against, but also that discrimination may be a part of the way societal institutions, organizations and companies function. (The Swedish Integration Board, [http://www.integrationsverket.se/templates/ivNormal\\_6426.aspx](http://www.integrationsverket.se/templates/ivNormal_6426.aspx))

<sup>8</sup> There are currently two Swedish governmental investigations on structural discrimination in process, one led by Masoud Kamali (<http://www.sou.gov.se/maktintdiskrim/>) and one by Paul Lappalainen (<http://www.sou.gov.se/strukturell/direktiv.htm>)

<sup>9</sup> Lagom means approximately "not too much and not too little"

<sup>10</sup> Men are for instance required to share the parental leave with the mother when having a child, and nearly half of the 349 parliamentary members in Sweden are women.

<sup>11</sup> What "integration" really refers to is unclear. In Swedish immigration policies, however, it has mainly referred to immigrants adapting to Swedish society, with a special emphasis on the labor market, which has been seen as a gateway to integration. In a current public investigation, this view is being questioned, claiming that it is not

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enough that immigrants have a job. A segregated labor market, where immigrants largely represent a low-paid underclass, hardly favors "integration" (Lappalainen, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Currently, five ethnic groups in Sweden have been granted minority status, which in practice means that they, e. g., have the right to communicate with authorities in their mother tongue. These groups are the Sami, the Jews, the Romani, the Tornedal Swedes and the Finnish.

<sup>13</sup> Today, several interviewees claim, Swedish mass media does more harm than good, illustrating immigrants in a stereotypical and often negative way.

<sup>14</sup> I have deliberately avoided to define the welfare state as limited to Sweden. I have however also chosen not to lift the debate to the European or global level, although increased European integration and globalization neither can nor should be ignored. To speak about a global welfare state, or a global citizenship as frequently is being done, seems to me to utopian and unrealistic to be seriously taken into account. When it comes to Europe, this vision should not be theoretically impossible. I do however not believe in the construction of new centralistic states, planning from above, but that multicultural welfare states characterized by horizontal structures and equality of opportunity should be constructed from below, with a strong representation of civil society. Would such an idealistic vision come true in one country, it could inspire others, and perhaps even influence the globalization process in a more democratic way. That, however, is yet another discussion.

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