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Like Garbo, Swedes just want to be alone
Book rejects nation of collectivists; they're 'hyperindividualists' - really
By Ivar Ekman / International Herald Tribune
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STOCKHOLM: Ever since the idea of nations and nationality gained serious popularity in the 18th and 19th centuries, peoples across the world have asked themselves that most basic of questions: Who are we? For Swedes, the answer has, for the last 50 years, included some kind of notion of collectivist semi-socialism, with their country the epitome of a high- tax, strong-state, cradle-to-grave welfare society.

But that self-image is being turned on its head. A recently published and widely discussed book, provocatively titled "Is the Swede a Human Being?" ("Ar svensken manniska?"), contends that Swedes are the opposite of collectivists: they are deeply individualistic.

The authors, Lars Tragardh and Henrik Berggren, both historians, argue that Swedes are more individualistic even than Americans, those notional world champions of rugged, swaggering individualism. The welfare state, they say, is the prime proof of this.

"The main purpose of the Swedish system has been to maximize the individual's independence," Tragardh, who has spent most of his life in the United States, said in an interview. "The picture of a collectivist animal is completely wrong; the modern Swede is a hyperindividualist."

Unlike other classics in the "who are we" genre, like Luigi Barzini Jr.'s "The Italians," the book by Tragardh and Berggren is not a collection of anecdotes and historical events. Nor is it an academic analysis of how modern Sweden came into being.

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Instead, it is a mix of literary history, political science and the sociology of love. The philosophers Immanuel Kant and Jean-Jacques Rousseau play prominent parts, as do Swedish authors and social engineers like Erik Gustaf Geijer and Alva Myrdal.

Despite the eclecticism of its source material, the book is surprisingly accessible, and both reviewers and readers have taken it to heart. The book sold out in a matter of weeks and is being rushed back into print before Christmas. Although it is so far available only in Swedish, it has received attention abroad, in Germany's Die Zeit, and France's Courrier International.

What seems to have caught the imagination of many readers is how the book manages to bring together two apparently contradictory pictures of what makes a Swede.

One is of what the authors call "people who love their country's stones" - a nation of shy nature lovers, ill at ease in the company of others, happiest when wandering alone in one of Sweden's many vast, dark forests.

The other is of a people who, despite this anti-social streak, have an incomparably high trust in the biggest collective of all: the state. The people of no other nation are prepared to give up as much in taxes - more than 50 percent of GDP, according to the OECD - as the Swedes.

This trust has shocked quite a few visitors to Sweden. In 1971, the American journalist and historian Roland Huntford argued that Swedes had given up their freedom in exchange for soulless material well being. "Modern Sweden has fulfilled Huxley's specifications for the new totalitarianism," he wrote. "A centralized administration rules people who love their servitude."

What Tragardh and Berggren say is that these two pictures are in fact intimately connected. The shyness is at heart the expression of a fundamental longing for individual autonomy and a desire not to depend on or be indebted to anyone, particularly not in intimate relationships - what the authors call "the Swedish theory of love."

"This means that an ideal relationship between two people is based on mutual independence," Tragardh says. "In comparative terms, this is rather spectacular. In most other cultures, the opposite - mutual dependence - is seen as the very stuff of love."

Politically, this "moral logic," as it is called in the book, has evolved into a bargain between the Swedish individual and the state, where the Swede leaves more in the hands of the state than an American, a German or an Italian would ever dream of. Swedish family policy, especially, is extreme in international terms, with state-subsidized infant care, strictly individual taxation after marriage, and no legal obligations toward parents when they grow old.

In return, the Swede gains liberation from relations of dependency - on the family, on the church, on private charities. (As the authors point out, American individualism is more a matter of anti-statism than this Swedish striving for intrapersonal independence).

The book's reading of modern Sweden has important political implications. In elections two months ago, the center-right opposition ousted the Social Democrats, who have held power for 60 of the past 70 years. But the right won not by promising drastic change, rather by pledging to preserve the welfare state and make it better.

"They turned away from neo-liberalism and accepted all the fundamental premises of the welfare state," Tragardh said. "This is the reason they have been so successful."

The book avoids painting an overly positive picture. The Swedish form of individualism certainly has its dark side - what Tragardh calls "the Ingmar Bergman reading of Sweden" - in which "individual independence is driven so far that it turns into loneliness, alienation and silence."

But the book's conclusion is that, in the end, the Swedish project has been surprisingly successful. As for the question posed in the title, the answer is: Yes, the Swede is a human being.