

About the Speaker

Lars Trägårdh is a writer and independent scholar who has lived in the US since 1970 while keeping his personal and professional ties to Sweden. In the 1980s he ran a café in San Francisco and later founded a computer animation company before returning to his academic studies in 1986. After living and carrying out research for several years in both Germany and Sweden, he received his Ph.D. in history from UC Berkeley in 1993. Subsequently he taught European history at Barnard College, Columbia University for ten years while also publishing frequently in Swedish newspapers and magazines. Currently he divides his time between the US and Europe. He directs a major research project on social trust at Ersta Sköndal University College in Stockholm and also serves as a coordinator for long term EU funded program on social capital and social policy at London School of Economics.

Publications by Lars Trägårdh include:

State and Civil Society in Northern Europe: The Swedish Model Reconsidered. 2007.

After National Democracy: Rights, Law and Power in America and the New Europe. 2004.

Culture and Crisis: the Case of Germany and Sweden (editor with Nina Witoszek). 2002.

“Welfare State Nationalism: Sweden and the Specter of ‘Europe’” in Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver (editors), *European Integration and National Identity: The Challenge of the Nordic States.* 2001.

Is the Swede Human? Community and Autonomy in Modern Sweden

Henrik Berggren and Lars Trägårdh

This is the provocative title of a controversial new book by the two Swedish historians Henrik Berggren och Lars Trägårdh (*Är svensken människa? Gemenskap och oberoende i det moderna Sverige*. Norstedts 2006). Released in the fall of 2006, the book has received an animated reception in Sweden, with numerous reviews and editorial commentaries in print media, radio, and television. It has been called “the most important book of the season” (*Aftonbladet*), “brilliant” (*Expressen*), “a classic” (*UNT*) and a book that “must be read” if one is to “understand Sweden and the Swedes” (*Svenska Dagbladet*). It has also received attention in the international media, including a major news article in the *International Herald Tribune* (“Like Garbo, The Swedes Just Want to Be Alone”, Nov 13, 2006):

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

The most startling and controversial claim of the book is that the supposedly “socialist” Swedes are, in fact, true individualists to an extent unimaginable even in the US: devoted to personal autonomy as much as they ever were to economic equality och social solidarity. At the heart of this social compact is an enduring cultural value, what the authors call “a Swedish theory of love,” according to which authentic love and friendship is possible only between individuals who are independent and equal. This moral logic has been institutionalized in modern Sweden through a radical alliance between the individual and the state, which they term “statist individualism.” The Swedish welfare state has thus liberated the individual from the ties of dependency that characterize the traditional family, the churches, and the charities. This is a social contract, they argue, that differs dramatically from those of other modern, western countries, notably the US and Germany, two countries that serve as comparative touchstones in the analysis.

A few links to reviews of *Är svensken människa?*

Herald Tribune: <http://www.iht.com/articles/2006/11/13/news/swedes.php>

Die Zeit: <http://www.zeit.de/2006/38/Schweden?page=2>

Svenska Dagbladet http://www.svd.se/dynamiskt/rec_litteratur/did_13519184.asp

Expressen: <http://expressen.se/index.jsp?a=6601555>

Dagens Nyheter <http://www.dn.se/DNet/jsp/polopoly.jsp?d=577&a=568103>

Uppsala Nya Tidning http://www2.unt.se/avd/1,1786,MC=5-AV_ID=524347,00.html