

“We need, especially those of us who are Swedish, to be reminded that life actually can be fun and that the unexpected isn’t something to be legislated away”, writes Johan Hakelius, journalist and author.



This is the likely scenario if you happen to use the wrong fork at a posh dinner in England: your friendly neighbour in the chair next to you gives you a radiant smile and helps you to find the right one. He might pity you as a BF – a Bloody Foreigner – but that is no reason not to be civil.

This is the likely scenario if you happen to use the wrong fork at a posh dinner in Sweden: your not very friendly neighbour in the chair next to you gives you a cold smile, leans towards his or her neighbour on the other side and whispers “Did you see what he did?”.

I’ve just written a book, “Döda vita män” (Dead White Men), on a handful of more or less eccentric Brits. In it you will find, among others, Evelyn Waugh and his son Auberon, Alec Guinness and George Orwell, Oswald Mosley and James Lees-Milne, Hugh Massingberd and Jeffrey Bernard. Most of them were fairly sane and some of them seemed almost shockingly normal at surface. Others may seem to be a card or two short of a full deck, but I would rather claim that they had a card or two extra and thus played with an overfull deck.

That tends to get you into trouble.

Terrible things happened to some of them; Jeffrey Bernard famously killed himself with bananas and Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that ilk only inherited the stewardship of his clan after a terrible fire “consumed Moncreiffe House with its baronet”. They all had very serious parts of their lives, many were depressed from time to time and some of them laboured under futile personal missions. Even so, it is a book full of joy. I have documented testimonies, not only from dependants and people who owe me money, claiming that my book has provoked outright laughter in subways and buses.

Why Swedes find individualists annoying

Written by Johan Hakelius

Thursday, 22 October 2009 03:24 - Last Updated Wednesday, 21 October 2009 18:39

The most frequent question put to me, since my book hit the stands, is if I could have written a similar book about Swedes. (The people, that is, not the vegetable.) My answer is always yes. But I need to qualify my answer on two points.

The first is a matter of practicalities and ultimately of my own laziness: To write a similar book on Swedes would be a true feat of hard work. There are and have been enough odd and interesting Swedes to fill at least one book, or even a small book-shelf. But to identify them and collect enough information to make the book readable would take years and years. Swedes do not rejoice in countrymen who find their own way through life or, to mix my metaphors, rock the boat. Such persons are known as "annoying people" and are usually ignored.

Which leads to my second qualification.

The book I have written is basically a comedy. It reminds us of what a strange, colourful and often absurd tapestry life can be. A similar book about Swedes would be a tragedy. It would remind us of what a painful, pitiful and cold place life can be.

Let me give an example from my book.

When Lord Lucan went missing after mistakenly killing his children's nanny, instead of his wife, the police interviewed most of his friends. They were particularly interested in the gambler John Aspinall. Aspinall had a passion for animals, matched by an intense loathing for mankind. He had recently been forced to move from London, after his pet-tiger Zara had ripped the head of an Alsatian during a quiet evening stroll. His new home was Howletts, an imposing manor-house in Kent. When the police came to question him they were shown into the dining-room. Seated at the table, eating lunch, they found Aspinall, parts of his family and his favourite gorilla.

Now, if Aspinall had been Swedish that would never have happened. To make a fortune, even in gambling, you need to be socially accepted, at least by bookmakers. After all, someone has to loose the bets that you win. And if you win and spend your money on tigers and gorillas you better live in a country where at least some people consider your oddness a private matter. You better not live in a country where the authorities would be unable to resist the temptation to lock the tigers, gorillas - and most probably yourself - up.

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Aspinall did. Lucky him. Britain, or at least England, cherishes its eccentrics.

The common trait among the dead white men in my book is that they were all fiercely independent. Still they were allowed to exist in an ordinary, conventional society. Many of them were loved. Some of them were trusted with high offices and important tasks. The common trait among people of their kind in Sweden is that they are given a very cold shoulder. A Swede is expected to toe the line and get in line. Those that refuse or are unable to comply are squarely placed on the margins of society.

I'm generalizing, of course, but even generalizations can be true at core.

An interesting fact is that many of the people in my book are upper-class or at least upper middle-class. You can easily find a vast number of eccentric working-class English, but there is a reason for my somewhat skewed selection. The English class-system is often mocked and attacked, but it has several advantages. It is a fairly open system, in the sense that nobody pretends that England is a class-less society. The Americanization of Britain may have created fuzzy boundaries between the classes, but my belief and experience is that social customs are very slow to change.

Criticizing the class-system is usually tantamount to criticizing the upper classes. What are they good for?

Here's another fine point with English class. There actually is a point with upper classes. The point is not, as Sir Iain Moncreiffe of that Ilk explains, that they are particularly gifted or talented. A good peer, claims Sir Iain, should be about as intelligent as an average person, say a station-master. The point is that they have the means to be independent. Not primarily financially – it does help, but isn't true and never has been true for many in the upper classes – but socially and culturally. The upper classes brings benefits to society as a whole by breeding and traduce the confidence to be independent. They are not part of the herd.

Again Sweden is at a loss. It is a very snobbish society, as the episode at the dinner-table we started with tries to illustrate, but it hides its snobbishness behind a veneer of egalitarianism. Many Swedes actually believe they live in a class-less society. They don't, but they live in a society where the upper class is trying to fit in, or at least is trying not be seen at all, rather than

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being seen as not fitting in. As such the Swedish upper class is pointless by Sir Iains standards.

So, the answer to the question “could your book be written about Swedes”, is yes. But not by me. And not as an enjoyable, inspiring read.

If I was a politician this is where I would end with a silly proclamation urging Swedes, especially those at the top of society, to be less conformist. I would claim that such a change in the Swedish mind would bring higher economic growth-rates, less depression and other wonderful benefits. But I am, thank the Lord, not a politician. Swedes have done pretty well economically by being conformist and being human is from time to time a depressing experience in any society.



I can really only see one obvious benefit with a society that encourages independence and eccentricity. It's not about money, or even happiness. It's about keeping your spirits up. We need, especially those of us who are Swedish, to be reminded that life actually can be fun and that the unexpected isn't something to be legislated away.

As Hugh Massingberd once said, all that matters in the end is kindness, good manners and humour. You will find very little of that in a herd.

Johan Hakelius

Journalist and author. Latest release ” [Döda vita män](#) ” (Dead White Men).

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