Analysis of Racialization in Sweden: The Case of Immigrants from Sub-Saharan Africa

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Cross border migration can easily result in exclusion when it produces an "undesired" immigrant population. Many scholars exploring this problem in Sweden argue that it is racism. I use the analytical framework for analysing racism by Anthony Marx to shed some light on this argument. This is important because Sweden has a reputation as a champion of equality and it is only recently that claims about racism have surfaced in the country. Anthony Marx views racism as a dynamic process that develops from a combination of institutional/structural forces and the actions of agents. He also considers racism to be historically embedded and tied to developments of the modern nation state. I use his framework to analyze social relations between "native Swedes" and immigrants from Africa. I argue that the discourse of the nation state and the significance of boundary marking have created a sense of belonging in Sweden which portrays immigrants from many non-European countries as the Other. In addition, these immigrants appear to be the exclusive targets of institutionalised practices of exclusion. However, their actions have not yielded a uniform racial identity from below and as such inhibits the consolidation of the process.

Introduction

Post World War II immigration in Sweden marked a new beginning in the country's migration history. It was during this period that Sweden moved from a country of emigration to one of immigration (Lithman 1987). In the late 60s and early 70s migration to Sweden became heavily politicised (Abiri 2000). Since then it has attracted considerable attention from different quarters**.** So far the dominant views about immigration appears to be dominated by two opposing views: immigration restrictionists argue that it causes problems like unemployment, crime, weakening of traditional values and destabilisation of the ethnic balance; while immigration supporters hold that it boosts up the economy and immigrants accept jobs that the "native" population would not want to do, that the receiving country is catching in on the investments that sending countries have made in their citizens through education and training and that immigration produces diversity (ibid). Elisabeth Abiri explains that these views are present in all societies and that the dominance of either a restrictive or friendly immigration policy anywhere represents victory at that moment for that particular view. However, she explains that debate on immigration is sometimes influenced by humanitarian sentiments.

Until 1967 migration to Sweden was virtually free but after this date immigrants from non-Nordic countries were required to secure a job and housing before they could be admitted. Implementation of this restriction was facilitated by the creation of the Swedish Migration board in 1969 as a central body in charge of immigration and immigrant affairs. Growing concerns about immigration and the plight of immigrants at the time prompted the development of an immigrant policy (also referred to as the Swedish policy of cultural diversity). In 1975 the Swedish parliament adopted the following three principles as the corner stones of the immigrant policy: *equality, freedom of choice and partnership* (Westin 2006). These principles were interpreted as follows: "equality" – immigrants residing permanently were to enjoy the same rights as Swedish citizens; "freedom of choice" – freedom of cultural choice and ethnic identity. (The government encourages this by providing assistance such as support for the teaching of immigrant languages and funding of immigrant associations and organizations); "partnership" – this refers to cooperation and solidarity between immigrants and their host through a spirit of common interest and shared purpose (Lithman 1987; Westin 2006). It is important to note that the above development took place at a time when immigrants in Sweden were largely from other European countries.

Migration to Sweden however took a different turn from the beginning of the 70s as many immigrants started coming from outside Europe-mostly from the poorer countries of the world. Many of them came as refugees and under family reunification owing to a very friendly refugee policy. This transition is considered a turning point in the history of post World War II immigration in Sweden.The 70s is generally considered to represent a shift from European dominated immigration to one that is characterised by an influx of people with a non-European background. It is also considered to represent a shift from "labour to "refugee immigration". Against this background, agitations against immigration today appears to target mostly non-European immigrants. We see this in the increasing restrictions on refugee entry and also in the subtle reformulation of the Swedish immigrant policy which has resulted in the re-interpretation of *equality, freedom of choice and partnership* in ways that gives less room for the accommodation of the cultures of non-European immigrants (Shierup & Ålund 1995). During this period also the discourse of immigration has shifted from politicisation to "securitisation" (Abiri 2000). When a phenomenon like cross border migration is framed in security terms it becomes imperative to put a halt to it in order to eliminate the threat. It is therefore not surprising that the general response to the presence of non-European immigrants today is highly negative. This can be seen from the difficulties

which they face in the labour market and accommodation just to name a few (Knocke 2000; Borgegård & Murdie 1997).

In recent times attention have been drawn to the plight of these immigrants and an increasing number of researchers are convinced that it is a problem of *racism* (Pred 2000; Norman 2004; Schmauch 2006). The arguments on *racism* all make reference to the emergence of a European discourse of belonging and then try to show how this influences the subordination of African (and other non-European) immigrants who are constructed as the Other. This argument raises some questions because we notice that the Swedish discourse of belonging does not only define people from a non-European background as the Other. What is considered Swedish identity is largely defined in relation to Swedish national symbols, which makes it difficult to think of Swedish identity as synonymous to a European identity. In addition, the subordination of immigrants in Sweden is neither restricted to the era of refugee immigration nor to immigrants from a non-European background (see Knocke 2000; Borgegård & Murdie 1997)**.** The fact that all immigrants (both Europeans and non-Europeans) face problems of subordination and exclusion leaves us wondering if it is reasonable to take the broad categories of European and non European identities as a given. It also leaves us thinking whether *racism* in Sweden is restricted to relations between Europeans and non-Europeans. This of course is not true considering that *racism* in Europe has not always focused on non-Europeans (Bancroft 2005).

Theories of Racism

In an influential essay Miles (1998) conceptualise racism as an ideological and representational phenomenon. He uses the concepts of signification and racialization among others to explain his point. By *signification* he implies a process whereby selected somatic characteristics like skin colour and other phenotypic features are attributed with specific meanings and are used to organised populations into distinctive categories. He explains that through signification a racist ideology identifies and represents a collective and attributes the collective so identified with negatively evaluated characteristics. By representing a collective in negative terms he points out that the "Self" is represented as the opposite and through this process of representation people are placed in distinctive social categories, which are ranked on a vertical scale. He views this entire process as racialization and explains that it occurs in such a way that people, the processes in which they participate, and the structures and institutions that result from it all become racialized. He however insists that *racism* should be viewed as an exclusive ideological phenomenon and it should not be confused with practices of subordination because *racism* operates within structures of class and gender dominations. The second argument he makes to support this view is that *racism* is not static but always changing. Here he points at the shift from "biological" to "cultural" racism in some societies and argue that what actually changes is the ideology. Mile's view is very critical to the concept of institutional racism which he sees as conceptually flawed because it is often used to refer to both processes and practices of subordination, which according to him could be unintentional. He insists that we can only talk of *institutional racism* if it can be proven that the exclusion of a subordinate group is based on a racist ideology (which can be distinguished by it capacity to identify and represent a collective in negatively evaluated terms).

The above perspective has been criticised for isolating practice from ideology. The argument made is that when *racism* is presented as an exclusive ideology the structural configuration of society is not seen as racist. The second critique is that *racism* is reduced to the level of cognition and projected as an individual problem, which can only be explained by looking at the intention behind an act (Bonilla-Silva 1997). Bonilla-Silva does not out rightly reject the ideological argument. Her main concern is that when *racism* is framed in a way that

draws a line between ideology and practice it conceals the fact that ideology is embedded in structural relations. She argues for a broader conception that takes this into account. Her analysis evolves around the concept of a racialized social system. She describes this as a social system in which relations are partially structured at the economic, political, social and ideological levels by placing actors in racial categories (or 'race'), which are organised on a hierarchy scale. She notes further that a racialized social system is only partially structured by *race* because modern social systems articulate two or more forms of hierarchical patterns. According to her, once social categories have been racialized the process acquires some autonomy and conceals the fact that racialization is embedded in other structurations. The hierarchical nature of a racialised social system as she explains produces definite social relations between the racial categories. Those on top of the hierarchy have power and control over those below in all spheres of social relations and use this to their advantage. The totality of these racialized social relations (and practices) is what she refers to as the racial structure of society.

Both arguments are quite insightful and complimentary to one another. I find Mile's concept of racialization particularly in-depth but the distinction he makes between ideology and practice raises many questions and is a major weakness in his argument. I therefore avoid drawing that line in my analysis. Following both arguments I consider *racism* to be a relation of subordination that occurs through a process of racialization.

Review of Racism in Sweden

> Cultural racism-wherein negative ethnic stereotyping leads to racists effects, to discrimination and segregation, to marginalization and exclusion; wherein skin pigment, hair color, and other bodily markers are unreflectedly translated into highly charged cultural markers; wherein outward biological difference and cultural become automatically (con)fused with each other and entire groups thereby racialized-is, practically and discursively, now clearly the most prevalent form of racism in Sweden.(Pred 2000; p. 66)

Allan Pred views the subordination of non-Europeans and Moslems in contemporary Sweden as a reworking of historically sedimented racism. The argument holds that the rise of nationalism in Europe around the eighteenth century coincided with the development of narratives about a homogenous European identity. The notion of a homogenous European identity as he explains, laid the ground for racism against those considered non-Europeans. He however, explains that today's racism is not just a continuation of past racism. He views it as a response to capitalists' developments and globalising effects that have brought hardship and created a lot of uncertainties. Structural changes in the economy, political transformation in Sweden and abroad are considered to be causing changes and anxieties which the host population turns to associate with the presence of the newly arrived non-European immigrants. Pred argues that the above circumstances have prompted the reworking of historically sedimented racism. This approach leaves us with two unanswered questions: first, what is the relation between a Swedish identity and a European identity given that the rise of European nationalism in the eighteenth century did not prevent the development of nationalism in the different European states; second, what is the nature of past racism in Sweden and how does it relate to contemporary racism?

In another study Schmauch (2006) explores historical relations between Swedes and Africans and come to similar conclusions like Pred. She argues that historically Africans were represented as an inferior Other in European discourses and that relations between Swedes and Africans were hierarchical. She goes on to talk about Sweden's involvement in colonising Africa and in the transatlantic slave trade. Her argument about slavery and

colonisation however does not explain much about the historical nature of Swedish racism. This is not to reject the impact of slavery on racism as argued for USA and other countries (see, Marx 1998; Wacquant 2005; Miles 1989) or the contribution of colonialism to the same effects (see, Goldberg 2002). The point is that slavery and colonisation produced a system of racial domination that was largely influenced by specific local conditions, which might not be the same in different places. Slavery for example, as argued by Orlando Patterson is a part of human history and appears to have had nothing to do with racism in many societies. He identifies -*powerlessness, natal alienation, and generalized dishonoured* as the constituent elements of slavery and argue that the enslavement of X and not Y has nothing to do with who they are but depends on whether or not the necessary conditions for slavery are present (Patterson 1982). Beside Patterson, accounts of the transatlantic slave trade show that racism in the US is a derivative and not a constituent element of slavery (Kolchin 2003; Marx 1998).

We can see that a discourse of the Other and the establishments of institutions for the domination of those described as Other have been cited as key factors for racism. However, it is important to analyse how specific forms of domination articulate with dominant discourse of Otherness to racialize a collective than simple consider that the existence of a discourse (of Otherness) or system of domination is proof of *racism*.

Analysis of Racial Domination

In this section I focus on how racism can be analysed. Here I turn to the analytic framework developed by Anthony Marx (1998). In a comparative study of the USA, South Africa and Brazil, he identifies specific factors and processes at institutional/structural and at the grass root levels, which greatly influence racialization. His analysis also looks at the historical development of racism in these societies and how the past influenced its development in recent times. Anthony Marx argues that the history of slavery in the USA, South Africa and Brazil produced a system of domination that was characterised by the master-slave relationship. The vertical relation between the master and the slave soon became perceived as one between "whites" and "blacks" since in the above societies the master class was largely "white" while slaves were all "blacks"[1]. This approach considers slavery to be a major cause and not an outcome of racism. His analysis shows that slavery was sustained by a complex network of institutional structures that were well established to treat blacks differently from whites. The abolition of slavery in the US, South Africa and Brazil as Marx explains was replaced by new forms of racial domination which inherited the colour line differentiation and its underlying principles. In the US and South Africa he identifies Jim Crow and apartheid as the succeeding institutions of domination. Though influenced by the past Marx contends that the institutionalisation of Jim Crow and apartheid were largely determined by current events in the US and South Africa. In both countries he explains that the dominant white population was divided over what to do with former slaves. While a section of the population supported integration another section opposed it strongly and threatened to use every means possible to prevent it from happening. Prior to this deadlock both societies had experienced confrontations between the pro and anti integrationists in the past and memories of the bitter encounters still lingered on the minds of many people. Marx explains that the ruling elites in both countries feared that similar confrontations could jeopardise nation building that was at a crucial point. He argues that the ruling elites decided to avoid any bloody and costly confrontation by appeasing the anti-integrationists.

This argument leaves us wondering whether the decision to exclude blacks did not also pose a similar threat given that the history of slavery was not a very smooth one since blacks in America for example are known to have fought on several occasions to free themselves

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1   "white" here refers to people of European descent while "black" refers to people of African descent.

from bondage (see Kolchin 2003). Anthony Marx agrees that it does but explains that the history of past conflicts between whites and blacks proved less threatening compared to past conflicts between factions of the white community. Turning to Brazil he explains that no formal institution of racial domination replaced slavery. However, he insists that contemporary relations in Brazil are characterized by the exclusion and subordination of blacks in the country. He explains that slavery created a system of structural relations that gave undue advantages to whites and though formal discrimination was abolished, the system of structural relations that was inherited from the past era of slavery still makes it easy to perpetuate the domination of blacks.

In addition to the above account which influences racialization from above; Anthony Marx also shows how factors and processes at the grass root level influenced developments in the above societies. He explains that through various acts of solidarity and resistance a black identity was developed from below and that institutions such as the black church and other organizations helped to consolidate this identity. The civil right movement in the US and the African National Conference in South Africa among others played very crucial roles in strengthening solidarity within the black community in these countries and also in establishing blackness as a racial identity.

Using the Analytical Framework of Anthony Marx to Conceptualise the Subordination of African Immigrants in Sweden.

Historical development in Sweden is quite different from those of the countries examined by Marx. While racism in the USA, South Africa and Brazil was largely influenced by a long history of close relations of asymmetry between whites and blacks, the presence of African immigrants in Sweden is a recent development. It is true that Swedes have had contacts with Africans in the past (see Schmauch 2006). These were however outside Sweden and had little impact on the Swedish society. It is therefore not surprising that many people in Sweden are ignorant of this past and some commentators on Swedish history think that contacts with Africans is a recent development (Runblom 1994). Unlike the above countries Sweden did not develop a system of domination that is comparable to slavery or Jim Crow and apartheid. This means that the condition under which Otherness was constructed in Sweden is slightly different from the above cases. In this section I focus on how Otherness is constructed in Sweden and how this influences racialization. I start by looking at how the discourse of the nation-state influences the production of a national identity and how this affects the construction of belonging.

> National cultures construct identities by producing meanings about the nation with which we can identify; these are contained in the stories which are told about it, memories which connect its present with its past, and images which are constructed of it (Hall 1992, p. 293).

Hall explains that the formation of national identity is done through:

1. narratives of the nation: through national histories, literatures, the media and popularculture; a set of stories, images, landscapes, scenarios, historical events, symbols and rituals are projected. These represent the shared experiences, which give meaning to the nation.
2. emphasis on origin, continuity, tradition and timelessness: "National identity" is represented as primordial and changeless throughout history
3. invention of tradition: some of the practices or rituals, which supposedly are of historical significance to the nation state, are relatively recent inventions.

4. foundational myth: locating the origin of the nation, the people and their national character to a distant time and place.
5. national identity often is grounded on the idea of a pure, original people or "folk".

From the above it is obvious that national identity is not based on a naturally constituted unity but is socially constructed. Construction of identity as a whole has a significant bearing on belonging (see Yuval-Davis 2006). Yuval Davis views belonging in plural terms but explains that under certain circumstances it is constructed as fixed and natural. This happens when belonging is politicised – a process, which she refers to as "the politics of belonging". The key points in her analysis that are relevant to this paper are: construction of belonging involves an act of active and situated imagination that changes according to the way Otherness is perceived; and that the politics of belonging involves the act of maintenance and reproduction of boundaries by the hegemonic political powers as well as the contestation and challenge of these boundaries by other political agents.

Perceptions of Belonging and Construction of Otherness in Sweden

In the Swedish context Otherness can be understood as the opposite of the Swedish identity. This identity is constructed around national symbols like language, social welfare, uniform educational system and Swedish church among others (Blank & Tydén 1995; Runblom 1992). The importance of a Swedish identity in the construction of Otherness can be observed in relations with European immigrants in the era of labour immigration. The establishment of "multiculturalism" as an official government policy at the time and the underlying principles of Swedish "multiculturalism" reveal that European immigrants then were considered to have a different identity and belonging from that of the Swedish people. Harald Runblom add credence to this point by arguing that the development of "multiculturalism" in Sweden was aimed at European immigrants and that policy makers back then had no reason to believe that large scale immigration from outside Europe would take place there after. The Otherness of European immigrants could also be seen in the exclusionary practices against them. (Knocke 2000).

The admission of immigrants from outside Europe today has altered existing views of belonging that were common in the days of "labour immigration". The construction of Otherness today is not just influenced by ideas of a Swedish identity but also by notions about a homogenous European identity. The view of a homogenous European identity is not a recent phenomenon in Sweden. Back in the nineteenth century Sweden played a rule in promoting the notion of a superior European identity. The first taxonomist to divide humanity into different categories in a descending order that placed Europeans at the top and Africans at the bottom was a Swedish scientist. He is believed to have laid the ground for [biological] racist thinking in the western hemisphere. Also, racist ideas that depicted non-Europeans as inferiors were disseminated through school textbooks across schools in the country (Pred 2000). Beside this history new developments such as the increasing political and economic integration of European states have strengthened solidarity between Europeans and promoted the notion of a homogenous Europe. The influence of the European identity on the construction of a Swedish "Self" portrays non-Europeans as more outsiders than European immigrants. We clearly see this in the extreme marginality of non-Europeans in Sweden when compared to European immigrants (Borgegård & Murdie 1998; Knocke 2000).

The shifting view of identity and belonging in Sweden is also reflected in the appeal that is sometimes made to the Nordic identity. This can be seen in the stronger solidarity between the Nordic states and the preferential treatment that is given to immigrants from the other Nordic countries when compared to other immigrants. Restrictions that were placed on labour immigration in the 70s for example, did not apply to Nordic citizens and while Nordic

immigrants could acquire citizenship after residing in the country for two years, those from other European countries could only be eligible after five years in the country.

From the above views the conclusion can be made that belonging in Sweden is not singular and static but multiple and dynamic. The construction of Otherness varies depending on who it is in relation to and also on the circumstance. One can therefore represents the different levels of belonging in Sweden as: "native Swedes", Nordic people, Europeans/people of European decent, and humanity. These levels of belonging could even be broken down further but the important point is that people from the "third world" countries would find themselves furthest away from the centre of belonging. The analytic framework of Anthony Marx however demands more than a discourse of Otherness in analysing racialization. As explained earlier he argues that racialization should be analysed by paying attention to the institutional/structural forces and also in the actions of agents.

Racialization from Above: Institutional/Structural Level

Differentiating between immigrants and "citizens" is the most common basis for de jure discrimination in all countries. Being an immigrant means having less rights and privileges as compared to other members of society. Although immigrants are subjected to different immigration restrictions (depending on where they come from), some basic forms of exclusion do apply to all immigrants in Sweden. They are barred from participating in national elections and from employment in certain sectors like the military and police (Lithman, 1987; Swedish migration board), and in some cases they risk deportation after serving sentences in prison.

One would wonder why these restrictions on immigrants should be considered to have any influence on racialization given that the immigrant status is only temporal. In official terms people stop to be immigrants in Sweden once they naturalize and this implies the Otherization of immigrants is a temporal phenomenon. In this regard it would appear problematic to see restrictions on immigrants as driven by racism because racial domination as explained earlier is premised on the eternalization of difference (cf Davis 2001). In reality however, the situation is a bit complicated because even after naturalization the "new citizens" (and their off springs) continue to be treated as immigrants. Recently in Sweden people have started asking the question, when does a person stop being an immigrant? This is because children born to immigrant parents are commonly labelled as second or third generation immigrants (see Westin 2006). Keeping formal restrictions aside, which are not so conspicuous because they touch only on a few areas of the immigrant's life, the bulk of discrimination against immigrants occurs informally and in relation to things that they are legally entitled to. What happens is that when people are discriminated the reason given is not their immigrant status (since it would be illegal) but cultural difference. The argument often goes that the culture/values of immigrants clash with Swedish work ethics and norms and that residential segregation is good because it brings people who are culturally similar and by so doing helps to preserve their culture (Pred 2000). We can also see the impact of the culture argument in the following remark from a top government official to allegations of increase theft by immigrants "it [is] part of their culture to not distinguish in terms of ownership… between mine and yours" (Norman 2004; p. 214). The risk in this kind of argument is that it essentialises culture. What is described as Swedish culture and immigrant culture are considered to be inherent and transmissible from generation to generation. In this respect the immigrant status does not seem to be temporal and that explains why even Swedish citizens of a noticeable immigrant background share a faith that is not so different from immigrants.

Racialization from Below: The Action of Agents

At the micro level the action of agents is quite different in Sweden when compared to other societies like the US and South Africa. The absence of well-established institutions of racial domination in Sweden-both in the past and in contemporary relations, makes it difficult for any collective action on the part of the victims. In addition to this, official policy toward immigrants and minorities in Sweden promotes cultural and ethnic differentiation. Though the dominant Swedish discourse about immigrant often talks of an immigrant culture (in singular) the country's policy of cultural diversity recognises and promotes cultural differentiation between immigrants. This encourages immigrants to maintain the cultural and ethnic identities of their home societies. This of course is detrimental to the development of a homogenous immigrant identity. Another factor that contributes to the fragmentation of immigrants is the fact that belonging in Sweden is defined in relational terms. Though people from other parts of Europe are also considered immigrants the fact that belonging is sometimes defined on the basis of a European identity means that European immigrants could identify with "native Swedes" and not with people from a non-European background.

Some Concluding Remarks

The uniqueness of Swedish society and the specificity of historical relations between Swedes and Africans make it difficult to think of racism against African immigrants and their siblings in the same way that racism is understood in societies like the USA and South Africa which exhibit some of the classic examples of racism in modern history. In these societies racism is rooted in past histories of institutionalised domination. This produced a system of domination that created a rigid dichotomy and fixed belonging. The different trajectory of historical development in Sweden means that we have to pay close attention to those aspects that set Sweden apart from the above societies as well as the similarities that Sweden share with them. One can therefore consider the construction of "Us" and "Them" in Sweden, the emergence of a discourse that represents "Them" as inferior to "Us", and the exclusion of "Them" as the basis for the establishment of a system of structural relations that makes it possible to exploit those defined as "Them". However it is important to note that unlike the above societies where notion of belonging appears to be fixed and rigid, belonging in Sweden is more fluid. In addition to this the lack of a rigid system of differentiation together with the official policy of cultural diversity promotes ethnic and cultural differentiation between different immigrants thereby compromising the development of a racial identity from below.

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